

California cutting back on prescription drug monitoring

By Sarah Varney, NPR

This is a story about what can happen when no one is looking. For the patients at Universal Pain Management, a medical clinic in northern Los Angeles County, Dr. Francis Riegler is always looking.

Riegler huddles with the clinic's nurse practitioner over a computer printout. The one-page report from the state's drug-tracking system shows that a patient was on the hunt for more Vicodin, a powerful pain reliever that he was already getting from Riegler's clinic.

California has the oldest continuous prescription-drug monitoring program in the U.S., dating to 1939. It used to rely on carbon copies: one for the pharmacy, one for the doctor and one to be sent to the state's Department of Justice. The system went online in 1998, and that's when its full power was realized. Now, Riegler and other physicians can log in and see which prescriptions their patients have filled anywhere in California.

"I think it's fair to say that we were able to weed out a significant number of people who were either abusing or diverting their medications or hoarding them where we simply had no idea," he says.

So alarm bells went off among doctors and law enforcement when California Gov. Jerry Brown announced last year that, for budget reasons, he was eliminating the Bureau of Narcotic Enforcement, which had long managed the prescription-drug monitoring program. Dr. Scott Fishman, chief of pain medicine at the University of California, Davis, is among those fearful that if California's system closes down, the Golden State

could attract pill pushers from around the country.

“The rest of the country is developing prescription monitoring programs, not abandoning them,” Fishman said.

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