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***OFFICE OF THE
PUBLIC AFFAIRS COORDINATOR
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SOUTHERN DISTRICT OF CALIFORNIA
San Diego, California***

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Officials See Emergence of Mexican Drug Trafficking Organizations that deal exclusively in Pharmaceuticals; Pharma-Cartels Associated with Violence Normally linked to Traditional Cartels

Pharmaceutical drug trafficking is becoming so lucrative that traditional Mexican cartels are looking for a piece of the profits, and reports of violence are on the rise.

Mexico-based Pharma-cartels are selling painkillers with a black market price tag that at one point was as high as \$80 a pill. As profits have reached into the millions of dollars, powerful Mexican cartels that usually stick to cocaine, heroin and methamphetamines have attempted to collect “taxes” from the relatively new cartels in exchange for permission to operate.

In one case, traditional traffickers abducted a member of a Tijuana-based Pharma-cartel and cut off several of his fingers because his organization failed to pay “taxes,” according to intelligence gathered by federal agents from Immigration and Customs Enforcement.

Law enforcement officials have also learned of instances of pharmaceutical traffickers using the same tactics as traditional cartels. In one case, a Pharma-cartel ordered a hit on a rival to prevent cooperation with authorities; in another situation, pharmaceutical traffickers sought to have a rival killed.

Federal agents and prosecutors in San Diego have targeted numerous associates of Mexico-based Pharma-cartels as well as U.S.-based trafficking operations in recent years. This office has prosecuted more than 25 alleged traffickers since 2009. Those indicted or charged include web masters, pharmacy workers, couriers, a doctor and a former Crips street gang member. They include citizens of Mexico and the U.S.

Investigators discovered that collectively the Pharma-cartels operated numerous websites, with thousands of clients who paid hundreds of thousands of dollars a month for the powerful and highly addictive painkillers hydrocodone, commonly known by its primary brand name Vicodin, and oxycodone, known by its primary brand name OxyContin.

Recreational use of oxycodone and hydrocodone drugs has surpassed that of cocaine and heroin with tragic results: In many major cities, including San Diego, more Americans die from drug overdoses than in car crashes – a trend that is driven by prescription painkillers, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

In an effort to raise awareness of these disturbing trends, U.S. Attorney Laura Duffy has joined The Partnership at Drugfree.org in The Medicine Abuse Project, a campaign launched in September which aims to prevent half a million teens from abusing medicine within five years and advises parents and others to take a pledge to take control of their medicine cabinets.

One in six teens has used a prescription drug that was not prescribed for them in order to get high or change their mood. Prescription medicines are the most commonly abused drugs among 12 to 13-year-old children, according to The Partnership.

“We want kids to know that abusing prescription drugs will take away their futures,” U.S. Attorney Duffy said. “These drugs are so alluring because they don’t have the same stigma as heroin or meth and they are easy to get, either from somebody’s medicine cabinet or the internet. But they are actually more deadly and dangerous for these very reasons.”

And on the law enforcement front, federal officials have put a high priority on identifying and prosecuting traffickers who make it so easy to purchase the drugs for recreational use, without a prescription, Duffy said.

“We are going after the medicine pushers with the same passion we have shown for dismantling the ruthless cartels that deal in cocaine, heroin and methamphetamine,” said Duffy, who personally prosecuted leaders of the infamous Arellano-Felix cartel. “To me, there is no difference between them. Lives are being lost.”

In San Diego County, the number of people who died as a result of prescription drug abuse has increased 26 percent over the past five years, from 211 in 2007 to 267 in 2011, according to a July report by the county's Prescription Drug Task Force. Emergency Room visits for prescription drug abuse also increased 64 percent, from 1,784 in 2007 to 2,937 in 2011, the report said.

The launch of the Medicine Abuse Project coincided with the National Prescription Drug Take-Back Day on Saturday, September 29, where the Drug Enforcement Administration and its state, local, and tribal

enforcement and community partners collected unwanted medicines in locations across the country. To the effort, take the pledge to stop medicine abuse at MedicineAbuseProject.org.

Recent federal prosecutions involving alleged pharmaceutical drug trafficking:

MexRx 09cr00902:

This was a 2010 investigation that targeted the Tijuana-based Samame drug trafficking organization, which according to court records used the internet to solicit and supply clients in the U.S. and around the world with oxycodone, hydrocodone and other drugs without a prescription. Six defendants have pleaded guilty. The investigation found that the cartel grossed approximately \$700,000 a month. A key defendant, webmaster Angel Luevano, pleaded guilty and was sentenced in December 2010 to 48 months in prison.

MexRx 2 10cr02153 Luis Daniel Garcia-Aldunate and Christopher Espinoza have admitted conspiring to sell oxycodone via the internet. Espinoza was sentenced to 33 months in prison. Garcia is scheduled to be sentenced Dec. 2. Espinoza, a 25-year-old Southwestern College student, was a courier for the Samame pharmaceutical drug trafficking organization until he split to form his own operation with Garcia and others.

According to Garcia's plea agreement, the Espinoza/Garcia Drug Trafficking Organization (DTO) based in Tijuana "would receive orders for scheduled pharmaceutical drugs that were taken from listings on various DTO web-sites. Once an order was placed, the purchaser was instructed to send payment to a particular mail drop-box or via Western Union. Once payment was received, the order would be processed by the DTO and the ordered drugs would thereafter be imported into the United States. Once in the United States, DTO co-conspirators would package the ordered drugs and ship them to the various purchasers via a commercial mail carrier. Along with the package of drugs, the DTO would also send an e-mail confirmation to the purchaser which contained the drug shipment's tracking number." Garcia admitted he received drug orders via the website and made sure the orders were processed.

Southside RX This was a 2011 investigation of the alleged drug distribution activities of a group that included Dr. Tyron Reece of Culver City and several employees of a Los Angeles pharmacy to acquire and distribute a wide variety of pharmaceutical drugs, particularly oxycodone and hydrocodone. Six defendants were indicted on a charge of conspiracy to distribute a controlled substance. An indictment alleges the doctor was paid to write fraudulent prescriptions that were processed at a pharmacy whose employees knew the prescriptions were false. This group serviced clients in Mexico, the Central and Southern Districts of California as well as in Louisiana and Texas, according to court records. The medical doctor has lost his ability to prescribe scheduled pharmaceutical drugs, and a trial date is set for Nov. 26.

Scrub-A-Dub, 11cr02814

This was an investigation of an alleged prescription drug operation that supplied OxyContin and other medicines to clients in California, Louisiana and Texas. The take down resulted in federal charges against seven defendants; four have pleaded guilty, one remains a fugitive, and two are set to go to trial. One of the defendants, Aaron Lawrence, 40, of Murietta, has admitted to acquiring the drugs from a commercial pharmacy in Los Angeles and distributing them. He is scheduled for sentencing Nov. 26

Scrub-A-Dub 2 11cr02813

Michael Hurn, Tyler Bremner and Brad Geary have admitted they conspired to distribute a controlled substance. Sentencing is set for Oct. 9.

11cr3530

An employee of a medical waste disposal company in Vista and three others were sentenced in connection with an oxycodone distribution ring. The employee was taking boxes of thousands of prescription pills meant for destruction and re-selling them through a network of intermediaries.

People you may want to interview:

Laura Duffy, United States Attorney, Southern District of California. Please contact Kelly Thornton, 619-546-9726 or Kelly.Thornton@usdoj.gov

Sherrie Rubin, Hope Foundation Director, whose son Aaron overdosed on prescription drugs and is now a paraplegic who can't speak and needs 24-hour care.

Teri Christensen, a San Diego-based spokeswoman for The Partnership at Drugfree.org, who can discuss the campaign to keep teens from abusing prescription drugs.

*“For Your Info” is an occasional story suggestion from Public Affairs Coordinator Kelly Thornton, who does some of the homework for you. All facts are pulled from court documents, interviews with federal prosecutors and agents and Justice Department statistics and documents.

For more information on prescription drug abuse and The Partnership's campaign, please see our website,