

## **Prescription Medications and Suicide Risk**

### ***What's the problem?***

- Psychotropic medications and other prescription drugs are increasingly used as lethal means in suicide attempts and completions because they are more available and less violent than other means.
- In Montgomery County, drug-related suicides more than tripled from 2006 (8 deaths) to 2009 (27 deaths); all drug related deaths increased from 82 in 2006 to 113 in 2011.
- Over that period drug-related suicides went from less than 9% of all drug deaths to more than 24%; about three fourths of these deaths occurred in the decedent's home.
- 75% of drug-related suicides involved more than one prescription medication.

### ***What's contributing to this problem?***

- The increase in prescription drug-related suicides is in part due to an overall increase in suicides in Montgomery County from 2005 (62 deaths) to 2011 (122 deaths).
- Psychotropic medications are increasingly available as such drugs are widely used to treat and manage psychiatric disorders such as depression.
- Psychotropic medications (including antipsychotics) are often prescribed by primary care providers.
- Pennsylvania lacks a central data prescription data base to identify all of a patient's current medications.
- Potentially lethal opioid analgesics originally dispensed for conditions such as post-surgical pain are present in many homes as are medications for insomnia and anxiety.

### ***Who is most at risk of attempting or completing suicide with prescription medications?***

- Overall more men complete prescription drug-related suicides than women but only by a small margin according to available reports. Local drug-related suicides appear to be on the rise in women.
- Men succumbing to fatal attempts may use higher doses, multiple drugs, and alcohol.
- Women, particularly those ages 50-59, account for more drug-related suicide attempts than men.
- The population at-risk of suicidal behavior involving prescription drugs is likely to increase as the "Baby Boomer" generation, the oldest of whom are now in their late '60s, continues to age.

### ***How can suicides involving prescription medications be prevented?***

Dispose of unneeded prescription medications safely. National Prescription Drug Take-Back Days are scheduled locally in many areas. Individuals who have a history of suicidal behavior should have access to only their daily medications. Individuals using prescription medications should assure that others in the household, both adults and youths, are not accessing their medications.

### ***Won't a suicidal individual simply use another means if their first choice is unavailable?***

Restricting access to lethal means does not result in the immediate substitution of other means. Impulsivity, especially as a result of alcohol use, plays a role in suicide and limiting access to preferred means may provide an opportunity for intervention in such cases.