Curbing abuse of cough medicine

Must be 18 to buy remedies with DXM over the counter

By Victoria Colliver
Chronicle Staff Writer

Starting Sunday, California will become the first state to try to curb the abuse of over-the-counter cold medicines containing a powerful cough suppressant by requiring consumers to show proof they’re over age 18.

The ingredient is dextromethorphan, or DXM, and it’s found in popular medications such as Robitussin-DM, Mucinex-DM, Delsym, Coricidin and NyQuil.

Some teenagers, and even younger kids, down the drug in excessive quantities to get a euphoric high, an act known as “robotripping,” “skittling” or “dexing.” The drug is sometimes referred to as “poor man’s PCP” for its hallucinogenic effects.

“By limiting the sale to minors, we hope to reduce the number of cases where there’s misuse or abuse of over-the-counter cough medications containing DXM,” said the bill’s author, state Sen. Joe Simitian, D-Palo Alto. “This is

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really nasty stuff with very serious consequences.”

Dextromethorphan is safe in recommended doses, but it can cause rapid heartbeat, involuntary muscle movements, liver damage, seizures and even death in rare cases. Its misuse among teens nationwide is rampant — as many as 1 in 10 teenagers have done it, according to surveys.

Rise in abuse

Since 2003, dextromethorphan has been the most commonly abused substance reported by teenagers to the California Poison Control System. According to the center, telephone consultations for patients ages 6 to 17 regarding DXM abuse increased 860 percent over the past 10 years. During that same period, there’s been a tenfold increase in abuse of the substance reported to the center.

“Those are false perceptions that because it’s over-the-counter, it’s safe as compared to illicit drugs such as cocaine and heroin,” said Ilene Anderson, senior toxicologist in the San Francisco division of the state poison control system. “It’s easy to fool parents, because it’s found in the medicine cabinet. It does lack the stigma of an illicit drug.”

San Rafael parent Mark Dale had never heard of “robot tripping” or DXM abuse until spring of 2010, when his teenage son Nic, who was already in trouble for drug abuse and was under strict supervision, managed to get hold of some Robitussin.

Dale said Nic was disoriented and could not talk but managed to utter “DXM” before he was rushed to the hospital emergency department. He said his son, who is now 17 and in a residential treatment center, has twice tried to commit suicide by overdosing on dextromethorphan.

While overdoses are common, deaths are rare and tend to occur when the drug is used with other illicit substances, according to experts.

Dale said the new law may help curb abuse but won’t stop it, because teenagers often shoplift these cough medications, steal them from medicine cabinets and get them from other kids. Classifying the drug as a controlled substance, he said, would make it prescription-only, or requiring retailers to keep it behind the counter would be more effective, he said.

Congress required decongestants containing pseudoephedrine, which is used in making methamphetamine, to be kept behind the pharmacy or drugstore counter as part of a federal law. Similian said he didn’t propose such restrictions on dextromethorphan because the drug is mainly being abused by teenagers, not used in the manufacturing process of a highly addictive illicit drug like meth.

The price of violation

Violations of the law by retailers will be infirmations, unless conspiracy or intent to sell the drug is proven. The ID check is similar to that required of alcohol or cigarettes.

Still, the bill faced substantial opposition. Retailers were concerned they would be unfairly penalized, and drug manufacturers objected to restrictions on their products.

But eventually, all of the groups, with the exception of the California Grocers Association, either came on board in support of the legislation or remained neutral.

“We certainly feel this is an important, good piece of legislation and will serve to reduce the diversion of DXM for robust tripping and other nefarious purposes,” said Jon Roth, chief executive officer of the California Pharmacists Association.

Several drugstore companies, including Walgreens, have already had policies in place requiring clerks to check identification before selling products with dextromethorphan.

The Consumer Healthcare Products Association, which represents the makers of these products, now wants Congress to enact federal legislation modeled after the California law.

“But it’s not the only solution. So much more needs to be done,” said Elizabeth Funderburk, spokeswoman for the group. “While age restrictions are one thing in retail settings, we also have to make sure parents are aware and that they’re safeguarding their medications at home.”

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Cough syrup sales ban takes effect Jan. 1

Some over-the-counter cold medications to be sold to adults only

By JONDI GUMZ

SANTA CRUZ — On Jan. 1, California will be the first state in the nation to ban the sale of over-the-counter cold and cough medications containing dextromethorphan, known as DMX, to anyone younger than 18.

SB 514, authored by state Sen. Joe Simitian, D-Palo Alto, will require store clerks to check identification for anyone buying these medications.

Taking dextromethorphan in large amounts can cause serious side effects or death, according to the National Institutes of Health.

High doses of DMX can produce intoxication, hallucinations, seizures, and “out of body” sensations similar to PCP and LSD.

According to WebMD, one in 10 teens say they’ve used DMX to get high, making it more popular than LSD, cocaine, Ecstasy or meth.

Stuart Heard, who oversees the California Poison Control System, testified in support of Simitian’s bill.

Calls for DMX abuse for children younger than 17 have grown from 24 to 228 in the past decade, an 850 percent increase. For this age group, it’s the most commonly reported type of abuse, more frequent than marijuana, according to Heard.

Santa Cruz police spokesman Zach Friend said cough syrup abuse hasn’t been an issue on the high school campuses in Santa Cruz but Officer Sarah Jackson, with the California Highway Patrol in Aptos, is concerned.

“It is something we do see,” she said, noting teens ask about cough syrup when they talk at schools about drugs and alcohol. “What they’re telling me is this is a popular substance.”

Users talk about having an out of body experience, said Chief CHP Officer Travis Herbert, who is certified as a drug recognition expert.

“The contents of one bottle is enough to cause hallucinations,” he said, adding that information is shared on YouTube, Facebook and Twitter.

Restricting the sale of DMX won Simitian’s 2004 “There Oughta Be a Law” contest. The idea came from Wayne Bentine and Ron Lawrence, both with the Palo Alto Police Department at the time. Lawrence is now the Rocklin police chief.

The legislation stalled in 2004, when most lawmakers were not familiar with “robotripping” or “skittling,” but Simitian reintroduced the bill this year.

“Today the extent and seriousness of the problem is better understood,” he said.

“By putting age limitations on these drugs, we’re communicating to kids and their parents that, when used inappropriately, these are dangerous drugs with serious consequences.”
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Robo-tripping law requires helps from all of us to work

By Wayne Benitez and Ron Lawrence

It was an all too familiar situation: a 15-year-old girl at Palo Alto High School — well-liked but troubled, too. She had just ingested several pills of what she and her friends called “Red Paint,” pills coated with dye that made your tongue red.

Those pills contained dextromethorphan (DXM). DXM is a drug that is safe and effective when taken as directed. We have learned, however, that when taken at much higher doses, DXM can cause hallucinations, loss of motor control, vomiting, paranoia, numbness, lethargy, slurred speech and “out-of-body” sensations similar to PCP and LSD.

Fortunately, the girl was rushed to Stanford Hospital before something truly tragic occurred. Still, that incident set us on a long journey; one we hope sees teens becoming much less likely to suffer the consequences of abusing DXM.

For the past seven years, we have worked with state Sen. Joe Simitian, D-Palo Alto, on a state law that prohibits the sale of cough and cold medicines containing DXM to minors. The legislation authored by Simitian, Senate Bill 514, became state law on Jan. 1, 2012.

Simitian embraced the issue in 2004 after we entered his annual “There Oughta Be a Law” contest back when he was in the Assembly. We won the contest, and Simitian proposed a new law.

Joining us in our efforts to protect our youth from the ill-effects of DXM was Dr. Ilene Anderson, a clinical professor in the School of Pharmacy at the University of California, San Francisco.

It took seven years of persistence by the three of us, along with Dr. Anderson, to see the law come to fruition. But even now, as Senate Bill 514 becomes law throughout California, the effort to curtail the abuse of DXM is far from over.

It took seven years of persistence by the three of us to see the law come to fruition. But even now, as Senate Bill 514 becomes law throughout California, the effort to curtail the abuse of DXM is far from over.

The new law only works if parents, teachers and other adults get involved and play a significant role. They are our partners in making this law effective. Yes, the main benefit of this law is that DXM will not be sold to minors. But there also is a component of this effort that necessitates parents making themselves aware of this drug and what it can do — and educating their children to its dangers.

Make no mistake; the abuse of DXM is growing. The California Poison Control System reports that telephone consultations provided for those aged 6 to 17 years regarding abuse of DXM increased 850 percent between 1999 and 2010. According to WebMD and the Consumer Healthcare Products Association, one in 10 teenagers say they’ve used DXM to get high-making it more popular than LSD, cocaine, ecstasy or meth.

One-third of a bottle of cough and cold medicine that contains DXM is enough to get high. A single bottle would be enough to cause more dangerous effects on the heart and nervous system. Intentionally ingesting excessive amounts of DXM-containing cold and cough medications that also have phenylephrine, acetaminophen and antihistamines increases the dangers dramatically.

Guest perspective

Seizures and liver injury do occur. SB 514 is going to help protect our youth from a dangerous problem. We also hope that it also strikes a blow to a whole subculture that has emerged around the illicit use of DXM — one that we come in contact with regularly as police officers. The use of DXM is referred to on the street as “Robo-tripping” or “skittling.” It also is known by several nicknames, including Poor Man’s PCP, Red Devils and Vitamin D.

On the Internet, there are actually websites devoted to instructing kids which medicines to take and how much to take to get the biggest high. Some even provide “recipes” for the best way to achieve the desired high based on a user’s height and weight.

Ten years ago, when we first learned of the dangers of dextromethorphan, there was very little awareness of the problem. Annual surveys asking students about drug and alcohol use didn’t include questions about DXM. Now many do.

Simitian’s bill is a significant step forward in the effort to protect minors from the ravages of DXM. But it can only go so far. All of us — law enforcement officers, parents, teachers and community leaders — need to work together to raise awareness of how DXM can harm our students and provide the support to keep them for doing so.

Wayne Benitez is a sergeant with the Palo Alto Police Department. Ron Lawrence, formerly with the Palo Alto Police Department, is chief of the Rocklin Police Department.