



ILLUSTRATION FOR TIME BY KIM ROSEN

prized. "If I have something good, like Oxycontin, it might be worth two or three Xanax," says a 17-year-old pharming veteran who was one of more than a dozen guests (and one of the few girls) at the New Jersey party. "We rejoice when someone has a medical thing, like, gets their wisdom teeth out or has back pain, because we know we'll get pills. Last year I had gum surgery, and I thought, Well, at least I'll get painkillers."

Unfortunately, prescription drugs are often far easier to obtain than illegal ones. Some teenagers come by their pills legitimately but trade them for others, like painkillers, that hold more appeal

because of their more potent high. Others order from shady Internet pharmacies where prescriptions aren't always required. Still others take advantage of the fact that neither doctors nor parents tend to think of prescription medications as drugs of abuse. That makes it a fairly easy proposition to fake or exaggerate symptoms in order to persuade physicians to write prescriptions, or to pillage medicine cabinets for pills left forgotten on shelves. "When adults and medical professionals treat medications casually," says Dr. Francis Hayden, director of the adolescent mental-health center at Mount Sinai Hospital in New York City, "we need not be surprised that adolescents are treating them casually."

Worse yet, many of these kids are abusing illegal drugs at the same time. According to the CASA report, about 75% of prescription-drug abusers are so-called polysubstance users who also take other drugs or drink—most of the New Jersey kids, for instance, were downing their pills with Miller Lite. "My friend told me to save the painkillers for when I'm drinking or getting high," says the 17-year-old with a

chuckle as she smokes her last cigarette and flings the empty pack into the backyard. She doesn't think of herself as an addict. But she recognizes the signs of addiction among her friends. "I know a lot of people who live by pills," she says. "They take a pill to wake them up, another pill to put them to sleep, one to make them hungry and another to stop the hunger. Pills can dictate your life—I've seen it."

N A T I O N

Trading for a High

An inside look at a "pharming party," the newest venue for teenage prescription-drug abuse

By CAROLYN BANTA

IN THE BASEMENT OF A CAPE COD ON A suburban street in northern New Jersey, a teenage boy turns to a friend and asks impatiently, "What did you get? I'll give you some of this"—indicating a bottle of Ritalin stuffed into the front pocket of his backpack—"for some of that painkiller." As a rap song plays just loud enough not to disturb the neighbors, his friend eyes the bottle suspiciously. "Is this generic, or is it the good stuff?" he asks. Upstairs, several teens are sitting at the kitchen table listening to a girl who looks to be about 15 tell how she got the narcotic Oxycontin from the medicine cabinet at home. "It was left over," she says, "from my sister's wisdom-teeth surgery."

This isn't an ordinary party—it's a pharming party, a get-together arranged while parents are out so the kids can barter for their favorite prescription drugs. Pharming parties—or just "pharming" (from *pharmaceuticals*)—represent a growing trend among teenage drug abusers. While use of illegal substances like speed, heroin and pot has declined over the past decade, according to a report issued three weeks ago by Columbia University's National Center on

Addiction and Substance Abuse (CASA), abuse of prescription drugs has increased sharply. CASA says about 2.3 million kids ages 12 to 17 took legal medications illegally in 2003, the latest year for which figures are available. That's three times the number in 1992, or about 1 out of every 10 teens. "It's a hidden epidemic," says Dr. Nicholas Pace, an internist at New York University Medical Center. "Parents don't want to admit there's a problem out there."

The problem isn't just that kids can easily become addicted to painkillers like Oxycontin or Vicodin, antianxiety medicines like Valium or Xanax, or attention-deficit-disorder drugs like Ritalin and Adderall. Taken without proper supervision, those medicines can send kids to the emergency room. They can lead to difficulty breathing, a drop or rapid increase in heart rate or trouble responding when driving a car, especially when the drugs are combined with alcohol, as they often are. Pain medications, which are also powerful nervous-system depressants, are particularly dangerous—and especially

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