

Doctor's prescription for tragedy with painkillers

Defense said patients bullied physician into prescribing painkillers. Families tell a story of tragic addiction.

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When Dr. Daniel J. Healy wasn't busy treating patients, he apparently dreamed of writing books. Among the prospective titles: "A Doctor Should Be Wealthy," "Physician Entrepreneur" and "The Million Dollar Practice."

It's not hard to imagine why Healy might have considered himself an authority on such topics. By at least one measure, the small-town doctor from Duarte surpassed every other physician in the U.S., and he was getting rich in the process.

Healy ordered more than 1 million tablets of hydrocodone in 2008: more than any other doctor and 10 times more than the average American pharmacy, according to government records. The drug, better known by the brand names Vicodin and Norco, is an addictive painkiller for which there is a thriving black market, particularly among teenagers and young adults.

Healy hauled in so much cash that he allegedly kept an automatic money-counting machine in his office to quickly sort through the thousands of dollars that came in on a daily basis.

The problem, authorities say, was that Healy had abandoned medicine in pursuit of profits. He needlessly prescribed drugs to patients he didn't bother to examine in some cases, and sold them to others, authorities allege.

In court papers, Assistant U.S. Atty. David M. Herzog called Healy "nothing more than a drug dealer in a lab coat" who "created and nurtured an army of addicted customers." Some patients referred to him as "the Candyman," according to the documents.

Healy, 54, has pleaded guilty to one count of dispensing oxycodone without a legitimate medical purpose; other counts were dropped in exchange for his guilty plea. He is expected to be sentenced Monday. Prosecutors have asked U.S. District Judge Manuel Real to send him to federal prison for more than 17 years. Healy's defense attorney has asked that his client be sentenced to less than five.

According to authorities, some of Healy's patients left his Kind Care Medical Center with hundreds or even thousands of pills at a time. One man who was pulled over shortly after leaving the clinic had a dozen commercial-sized bottles of Vicodin and three containers of the anti-anxiety medication Xanax, 7,500 pills in all, authorities allege.

Healy came under scrutiny when the father of one of his regular patients complained to the police department in Monrovia, which borders Duarte. Over the next several months, Det. Rich Doney and DEA investigators Mark Nomady and Susannah Herkert interviewed patients, conducted surveillance and reviewed Healy's prescribing records.

After raiding Healy's office last year, authorities calculated that he made nearly \$700,000 on sales of hydrocodone in 2008. It was during the raid that they found a notebook containing the would-be book titles.

Even before his most recent troubles, Healy had been placed on successive terms of probation by the California Medical Board after accusations of incompetence, dishonesty, fraudulent billing, aiding and abetting the unlicensed practice of medicine, and unprofessional conduct. He was still on probation when he began dealing drugs from his office, prosecutors contend.

In court papers, Healy's attorney, Roger J. Rosen, depicted a wholesome image of Healy, who as a child was literally a Boy Scout and an altar boy.

Most of Healy's patients loved and respected him, Rosen said. Those who are part of the government's case represent a tiny fraction of his practice. At times Healy tried to "gently address" his patients' addictions, the lawyer said, but his submissive personality made it difficult for him to stand up to those who demanded drugs.

His patients "bullied the hell out of him," Rosen said. "He made a mistake."

In interviews with The Times, some of Healy's former patients and their loved ones described a wake of misery in which parents fought to get their children off drugs, families were destroyed and finances drained.

Some of his patients were in their late teens or early 20s, people whom he met through his own sons, two of whom pleaded guilty to drug possession charges. Several patients' relatives unsuccessfully pleaded with Healy to stop supplying their loved ones with drugs. And, some patients carry lasting emotional and physical scars from their association with Healy.

'I was getting high for free'

Luis Partida Jr. knew Healy as a dad before he knew him as a doctor.

He was friends with Healy's youngest son, Brenton, and had been to the Healy home several times. In his circle of friends, Partida said, he began to hear rumors that the elder Healy was no ordinary doctor. One friend told him Healy liberally dispensed drugs and that people could get whatever they wanted, according to court records.

Partida soon learned for himself that Healy would give him whatever he was willing to pay for, he said in a recent interview. He got hooked on Norco, he said.

To help support his habit, Partida began dealing some of the pills he got from Healy. He sold pills to friends for several times the 90 cents per tablet he paid.

"I was getting high for free," he said. "I'd have cash in my pocket and a bunch of free pills."

He said he continued taking the pills despite a drug-induced blackout that resulted in hospitalization several years ago. At one point, Partida said, he and his girlfriend, Allison Abdallah, and another young friend were living in the same apartment complex off Foothill Boulevard. Their lives, he and Abdallah said, revolved around visits to Healy's office.

"It was Healy Mondays, Healy Wednesdays and Healy Fridays," Abdallah, 21, recalled.

They would load up on Norcos and Xanax -- "anything we wanted" -- and lie in front of the television watching movies until it was time to go to their jobs waiting tables. They would take more drugs at night, sleep in late, and start the process all over again.

They helped finance their habit with frequent trips to the pawnshop, pawning their own -- and sometimes others' -- possessions.

Abdallah and Partida say they have been off drugs for more than a year -- Abdallah went through rehab; Partida kicked the habit cold turkey in his family's living room. Both were interviewed by authorities in connection with the probe.

Abdallah said she accepts responsibility for her own actions but blames Healy for fostering her addiction.

"He was like a doctor as puppet master," she said. "He was slowly killing us all."

'He couldn't walk. He couldn't talk.'

Tammy Moeller was pleased when she learned that Healy was going to be treating her husband, Mitch, for back and shoulder injuries he suffered in his job as a mechanic. Healy was a member of her Catholic parish and she figured her husband was in good hands.

She said she thought nothing of it when Healy put her husband on Vicodin. But when he was still on the drug months later, and no longer seemed to be himself around the house, she confronted Healy.

"I think he's addicted," she said she told the doctor. "Quit giving it to him."

She said Healy seemed concerned and stopped prescribing the drug for a little while. But when she ran her credit report a few weeks later she found new charges from Healy's clinic. When she went in to talk to Healy a second time, she said, he wouldn't look her in the eye.

"I yelled. I made a scene," recalled Tammy Moeller, who has since divorced her husband. "Then I left. What can you do?"

The last time she saw her ex-husband, she said, was the day Healy was arrested. She happened to drive by Healy's clinic and saw her ex-husband parked there.

"He couldn't walk. He couldn't talk. He was literally drooling," she said.

According to an adult son with whom he had been staying recently, Moeller does not have a fixed address. He could not be located to be interviewed for this article.

A law enforcement source who was present the day Healy was arrested confirmed that Moeller was at the doctor's office and appeared to be under the influence of drugs.

A former employee in Healy's office told authorities about a patient identified as "M.M." who "can barely walk or function because [he] is so drugged up," according to court records. A law enforcement source familiar with the investigation confirmed that "M.M." is Mitch Moeller.

Taking 40 Norco tablets a day

Miguel Lopez had been successful at hiding his addiction -- for a while.

The stay-at-home dad had been suffering from migraines when he drove past Healy's pain clinic and decided to give it a try. He was given a prescription for Vicodin: One every five to six hours.

"That's how it all started," said Lopez, who was also interviewed by authorities.

After a few weeks, he said, Healy switched him from Vicodin to Norco -- he's not sure why. After a while the headaches were gone, Lopez said. "But I started going back to him just to get the pain meds."

By the end of 2008, he said, he was taking 40 Norcos a day, a habit that was costing him about \$2,000 a month. At 5-feet-10, his weight had dwindled to just over 100 pounds. He was having trouble hearing and tests showed that he had severe liver damage. His wife thought the symptoms might be the result of some kind of disease.

The truth came out during an annual holiday trip to the Midwest. Midway through the vacation, Lopez recalled, he realized he was running short of pills and needed to go back to Los Angeles. He wouldn't say why at first, but when his wife pressed him, he told her of his addiction for the first time, he said.

He caught a flight to LAX and headed straight for Healy's office, he said. On the way, as he struggled with pangs of withdrawal, he drove off a freeway embankment and totaled his car, he said. Unfazed, he had his father pick him up and take him to Healy's office, where he got more drugs.

After two stints in rehab, Lopez said he has broken free of his addiction. He's begun to put on some weight and his liver tests have been steadily improving. But he carries permanent reminders of his addiction: A pair of cochlear implants -- special hearing aids that are inserted in his head. His doctor said they are needed to reverse near-total hearing loss from long-term hydrocodone abuse.