

Feds begin crackdown on online pharmacies

American Fork, Utah (CNN) -- Pharmacies in Utah and Illinois are at the heart of an illicit nationwide network providing prescription drugs over the internet, federal agents state in court papers filed in two cities.

In search warrant affidavits obtained by CNN, agents state the business was centered around two pharmacies, one in the Chicago suburb of Des Plaines, Illinois, and the other here in this small town south of Salt Lake City.

According to the affidavits, both pharmacies are owned by the same man, Kyle Rootsart -- the subject of a 2008 report by CNN. One of them, the Des Plaines company now called Rand Pharmacy, combined with another unidentified pharmacy to ship 30,000 packages of prescription drugs across the country during the first six months of 2010.

"This is a pretty large ring of at least 200 websites that acted as internet pharmacies that were basically selling drugs -- prescription drugs -- without requiring a valid prescription," John Horton, a former official in the White House Office of National Drug Control Policy, told CNN. "These affidavits indicate this was a multiyear, multimillion-dollar operation involving thousands and thousands of prescriptions. Going back in time, there were even deaths involved with this organization."

The affidavits say most of the drugs were highly addictive, especially muscle relaxants called Soma and tramadol. And the majority of the prescriptions, a government source told CNN, were authorized by the same physician, Dr. William E. Morrow of Layton, Utah, who had never seen or even talked with those ordering the drugs online, according to the documents.

Utah state records show Morrow's license to dispense controlled drugs was revoked for three years, beginning in 1999, because he prescribed such substances without following proper procedure. He paid a \$1,000 fine and was again allowed to dispense controlled drugs in 2002. His license to practice medicine was not suspended.

CNN's Special Investigations Unit first examined Rootsart and Roots Pharmacy, the company he owns in American Fork, in 2008. CNN Correspondent Drew Griffin ordered the antidepressant Prozac over the internet without a doctor's prescription, and the pills were delivered by overnight express the following day.

The affidavits show federal agents doing essentially the same thing in a series of test buys between 2008 and April 2010 -- ordering drugs from a variety of websites and receiving the pills within a day or two. In addition, the agents received dozens of follow-up e-mails encouraging them to purchase more drugs.

Spokesmen for the U.S. attorney's offices in both Utah and Chicago declined to comment. But

former White House official John Horton, who now is president of an online pharmacy watchdog site called LegitScript.com, told CNN that the cash involved is significant.

"With approximately 5,000 prescriptions being processed a month, at roughly \$100 a prescription, that's at least, what? A half a million a month being made by this operation alone," Horton told CNN.

Rootsaert did not return phone calls or answer a knock on his door. His lawyer, Peter Stirba, told CNN in an e-mail that he had not had an opportunity to speak with his client about the affidavits.

CNN was able to locate Morrow, approaching him in his driveway as he arrived home. He quickly ordered CNN's team to leave.

"I don't want to talk now," he said. "Now get off the property. Get off the property."

Morrow refused to answer a series of follow-up questions.

Horton told CNN that with the affidavits, the Department of Justice was attempting a new line of legal reasoning to clamp down on online pharmacies.

"The Department of Justice, for the first time, is saying these are considered unregulated drugs, and that is a violation of the law," Horton said.