

Individual columnists in care of The Sentinel.

### COMMUNITY ADVISORY BOARD

## Face up to consequences of prescription drug abuse



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**W**hen news of Michael Jackson's death from cardiac arrest broke a week ago Thursday, I was vacationing at a Wisconsin cabin with no phone or Internet access.

I never avidly followed Jackson, but being a child of Generation X and now a cultural studies scholar with a growing academic interest in the music industry, I follow popular music. The 50-year-old singer was rehearsing in Los Angeles for a comeback tour scheduled to begin in London this month.

An autopsy report indicated that Jackson had taken prescription medication. The toxicology test results, which can indicate the type of drugs in Jackson's system, could take up to six weeks. Jackson's personal physician, Dr. Conrad Murray, has denied that he administered drugs to Jackson before his death.

Clearer details behind Jackson's death may not emerge for some time. However, Jackson's family and close friends speculate that his death was caused by possible prescription drug abuse of painkillers, anti-depressants and anti-anxiety medications.

Jackson is a high-profile case, but his death reaffirms how powerful prescription drugs are common in many American households today.

Shortly after my father was hospitalized in 2005, my sister and I found bottles of the powerful painkiller Vicodin in his home. His doctor prescribed the drug with little or no educational information after my father complained of back pain. When my sister, who works at a hospital, asked my father about the drug, he did not even know its side effects.

It's little wonder that so many Americans misuse prescription drugs in a culture that popularizes but not does always educate people about them. According to the U.S. government's Office of National Drug Control Policy, prescription painkillers rank second behind marijuana as the nation's most common illegal drug problem.

In 2005, the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA)

reported that 48 million Americans aged 12 and older (or 20 percent of the U.S. population) have used prescription drugs for non-medical reasons in their lifetimes. Elderly people are susceptible to prescription drug abuse because doctors prescribe them with more medications than young patients, stated the NIDA.

Intentional prescription drug use among youths is especially alarming. Many studies indicate that college students, teens, and younger children take prescription drugs to self-medicate for undiagnosed conditions such as anxiety, to get high, or to boost school performance. In 2004, NIDA's "Monitoring the Future" survey found that 9.3 percent of 12th graders had used Vicodin without a prescription in the past year. Additionally, 5 percent of 12th graders reported taking another painkiller, OxyContin, in the past year.

These medications benefit many people, but their prevalence is not always critically examined. Generation X and younger cohorts have grown up in a society where drugs are routinely used to treat conditions such as attention-deficit disorder and depression.

In 1997, the FDA permitted drug companies to expand direct-to-consumer advertising. Nielsen Media Research estimates that companies spent more than \$1.5 billion on direct-to-consumer television ads during the first half of 2007. Most television ads minimize risk information, according to a 2008 University of Georgia study.

Given the frequency of drug advertising and misuse, Jackson's sudden death is a societal symptom rather than an aberration. Dr. Deepak Chopra, a spiritual teacher and medical doctor, said on CNN's "Larry King Live" last Friday that he had been concerned since 2005 that Jackson was abusing painkillers.

Chopra echoed my own thoughts when he said that Jackson's death, sad as it was, would hopefully bring more public awareness to prescription drug abuse in the United States.

### LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

## Judging a health care system

Recently, a letter-writer went on and on about the "world's greatest health care system." I believe there are two ways to judge a health care system -- outcomes and cost.

One way to judge outcome is longevity. How long on average does the general population, and particular segments of it, live? There are several countries with longer life spans than the United States that pay less for health care. For instance, the average lifespan for a Cuban and U.S. citizen are virtually the same. How can this be in an impoverished, communist country? Can it be because all citizens are covered, all are treated equally and the emphasis is on preventative care, not emergency intervention?

Secondly, no one can deny that we have the world's most expensive medical care. We spend more on the end of life than the beginning. Instead of giving good care to expectant mothers, we spend millions on the prematurely born. Doctors go into specialties because they can earn big money instead of providing primary care often because they are deep in debt with medical school loans. Hospitals provide redundant services because they want to make money.

Lastly, I would want to address the fairness of our system. When I worked for a

Fortune 100 company, I received wonderful medical benefits for the whole family after only three months. I did not have to pay anything because I was willing to join a first-class HMO, which paid for everything oriented toward health and prevention. Because they paid for a good cardiologist and tests, my husband managed his irregular heartbeat and did not have a heart attack. That is what health care should do.

Although my husband had worked over four years for his employer, it was a small company and provided no benefits. Where is the American fairness in this? Should a person who works for themselves or a small business have no health care or pay a substantially larger proportion of their income for lower quality health care? Is the "world's best health care" only for the rich or those working for the right company?

I believe everyone should pay the same percentage of their income for health care and be guaranteed equal care whether their insurance plan is public or private. As far as a public plan is concerned, I have no problem with my Medicare, which costs less than my husband's company-provided plan and covers more.

**JUDITH SCHNEIDER**  
Saugatuck Township

### Count franchises among independent local businesses

It's great to see the advertisements from Lakeshore Independent Business Alliance celebrating "Independents Week." I think it's great to buy locally and I always try and do that. My only problem with the alliance and their week is that they leave out a very small but very worthy group of businesses -- the franchisees.

True, the franchisees may not have their headquarters in Michigan, but franchise owners do -- they own their business here in Holland. They bring just as much (maybe more than some) to our community.

Franchise owners work in their business every day and have that personal,

intimate communication between the owners and their customers. They also give back much to the community in the way of fundraisers for local charities and donate their products to the community when asked without hesitation.

Maybe the alliance needs to educate itself and take a little closer look at the people who help make "their community a vibrant place." As for me, I just may choose to use my "power" and boycott the big box chain stores and spend it at a franchise.

**BETH KRAGT**  
Laketown Township

### Service members sought to receive 'care packages'

The Sons of American Legion Post 6 will be sending out "care packages" to service members on July 23. We need your help. If you have a friend or relative in the service and you would like to add them to our mailing list please e-mail us their address or send us a post card with their address.

Squadron 6 has sent out 700 packages overseas. With the large number of men

and women from West Michigan service still in service in Iraq and Afghanistan, they still need things from home.

E-mail us at [wmreicks@hotmail.com](mailto:wmreicks@hotmail.com) or send a post card to American Legion Post 6, 10820 Paw Paw Drive, Holland, MI 49423 attn: Bill Reicks.

**BILL REICKS**  
Holland

### HOW TO WRITE A LETTER TO THE EDITOR

**Letters:** The Holland Sentinel welcomes letters on any subject. Include the letter writer's name, address and telephone number for verification. Letters not sent over the Internet require a signature. The Sentinel reserves the right to edit or reject any letter.

**Maximum length:** 400 words.

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