

New Database Seeks To Limit Sales of Cold Medicines

By Joy Lukachick | LSU Student

When traveling from her home in Raceland, La., to shoot photographs for her work, Sarah Thibodaux has to remember to throw another item in her overnight bag that she can't leave without -- her Claritin. If she forgets her medicine, Thibodaux worries that she may have to suffer through a cold, the last thing she wants to be dealing with.

After June 15, pharmacies will be electronically informed when to turn away customers who have surpassed the legal limit of over-the-counter cold medicine per month to be in compliance with a new state law. The law is to prohibit the sale of cold medicine containing pseudoephedrine in an effort to prevent manufacturing methamphetamine.

Lawmakers passed legislation last year, making Louisiana the third of 10 states to sign a contract allowing Appriss, a Kentucky-based company, to provide its tracking system known as National Precursor Log Exchange or NPLEx to the pharmacies.

The database allows the pharmacist to pull up the buyers' information and determine if the monthly legal limit of cold medicines has been exceeded, said Anna Vu, a pharmacist at Dutchtown Pharmacy.

Before, when a questionable person would walk in wanting to buy pseudoephedrine, Vu said she would have to decide "do you sell or not sell based on appearance?"

A pharmacist doesn't want anyone to not get their medicine, but at the same time Vu said she would be concerned about enabling a crime.

Now the tracking system will print out a slip of paper that says if the person is allowed or denied to buy the cold medicine, said Kelly Lambert, a pharmacist at Albany Drugs.

"It gives us an actual excuse not to sell it to them," she said

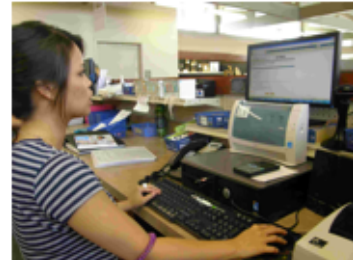
The database is designed to monitor the sale of cold medicine, said Jim Acquisto, an Appriss spokesman.

"We have the ability to prevent the crime from occurring," Acquisto said. "We block a ton of pseudoephedrine that doesn't go out the door."

Since the cold medicine companies have agreed to pay for the service, states that enact legislation for NPLEx can use the database free of charge, he said.

Pharmacies will be required to be on the system by June 15, he said. In the state contract, a store without Internet access can apply for an exemption through the State Police Department.

While federal law required stores to keep a written log of such purchases, prior to this year Louisiana police say they didn't have a system that organized those sales.



Dutchtown Pharmacist Anna Vu shows how the NPLEx system uploads a cold medicine buyers information. Pharmacies will be required to use the system beginning June 15.

"There wasn't a good system for the implementation of that law," said Sgt. Markus Smith, State Police spokesman.

Smith said state police will play a major role in monitoring the database -- called MethCheck on the law enforcement side -- keeping the information in the system for the record. Since the database is uploaded in real time, police can be notified of cold medicine transactions as they occur, he said.

But some police say the system has flaws, especially in looking at the bigger picture in preventing the spread of meth.

When Det. Danny Perkins of the Livingston Parish Sheriff's office used the database only a handful of one of his suspect's record appeared in the system. "We had information that he was purchasing pseudoephedrine everyday from Gonzales, Mississippi and New Orleans. This guy had been everywhere."

While the database can be a useful tool to spot illegal purchases once all the pharmacies are online, it's not the remedy for catching all the meth cooks, Perkins said.

Most meth cooks buy their ingredients from "smurfers" --people who purchase the pseudoephedrine and sell it to the cooks, he said. Many smurfers have fake IDs and know which stores use a database and which don't.

Rapides Parish Sheriff's Lt. Michael Lacour said his division uses the database as an investigative tool after identifying a suspect. "You need a suspect first. If you don't (have one), you're closing your eyes and throwing a dart."

The tracking system's main purpose isn't to catch the smurfers in the act, counters Sgt. Smith, but to keep them from purchasing the ingredients needed to make meth.

"It's not so much designed to set someone up for arrest, but as a monitoring (tool)."

Lt. Carl Townley with the Caddo Parish Sherriff's office said his department was one of the first in the state to begin using MethCheck.

The system has improved as more pharmacies are logging their sales in the database and does use the system to find the meth cooks, Lt. Townley said. "Before (MethCheck) we could go look at the books. Nothing was computerized. It was all foot work."