

FRIDAY FORUM

Survey needed to curb use of drugs

By Howard M. Talenfeld and Maria E. Abate

The use of dangerous prescription medications for children and adults in residential and group home facilities licensed by the Florida Agency for Persons with Disabilities is an alarming situation.

Two years before the suicide of Gabriel Myers, a foster child who was prescribed a "cocktail" of powerful psychotropic drugs, 12-year-old group-home resident Denis Maltez succumbed to serotonin syndrome after being given similar drugs.

Gabriel's death brought to light the near-rampant use of these drugs among Florida's foster children — and resulted in a sweeping review of the practice by the Florida Department of Children and Family Services. The APD should conduct a similar review.

Such a survey would likely find what a review of Denis Maltez's death confirmed: Some group homes allow these drugs to be administered to adults who are not competent to provide informed consent and to children whose parents or guardians have not provided such consent. These drugs often are prescribed without a full physician review or medical history, without parent or guardian consent, and in an "off-label" fashion not intended by the manufacturer. Rarely are behavioral interventions exhausted and investigations undertaken to ascertain how the different medications will react with one another — or how the individual will respond to the regimen. The drugs also are prescribed and administered without appropriate follow-up monitoring and blood testing, as was the case with Denis Maltez.

The DCF review found that 2,669 of Florida's 20,235 foster children under the age of 17 were given one or more psychotropic drugs — with one in six lacking required permissions.

We call upon the Florida Agency for Persons with Disabilities to join DCF Secretary George Sheldon in a review and scrutiny of these practices. APD should survey all licensed group homes working with the agency to determine how many are administering psychotropic medications without appropriate consent, and how many are using these medications as chemical restraints. We are also asking that the APD take necessary actions to ensure appropriate procedures are in place so that these medications are used appropriately and only as a last resort after all behavioral interventions have failed.

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