

Lethal diet pills under scrutiny in U.S.

HARLINGEN (AP) — Demand has exploded for a potentially lethal trio of pills Mexican doctors prescribe for weight control, prompting federal officials to reconsider a policy allowing the drugs into the United States.

The regimen of three pills containing four different drugs has been linked to deaths, mental illness, heart disorders and other physical ailments, federal officials say.

"The American public has been looking for a diet miracle for years and they'll take anything," said Donald Heaton, a regional director for the Food and Drug Administration in Dallas. "Unfortunately, they're going to hurt themselves."

"It's not a panacea for everybody. The lucky ones are the ones who are going to only lose weight. There's no question they work, if they don't kill you first."

The U.S. Customs Service allows the drugs to be brought into the United States if prescribed by a registered physician and purchased at a registered pharmacy.

Charles Conroy, a Customs spokesman in Houston, said the drugs must be declared upon crossing into the United States, and must be of a small enough quantity to satisfy inspectors that there is only

enough for personal consumption.

But Heaton said he believes it is illegal to bring the drugs into the United States.

"It's a gray area we are exploring now," he said. "It falls into a loophole associated with short resources."

Arnold Lochner, diversion group supervisor for the DEA's Houston division, said ingredients in all three pills are prescribed in the United States, but not for the type of diet regimen the Mexican doctors prescribe.

The most popular weight-loss regimen involves Ponderex, an amphetamine used as an appetite suppressant; Redotex, an appetite control drug that contains an active ingredient found in the depressant Valium; and Monduretic, a diuretic, Lochner said.

Heaton said that Redotex is not allowed in the United States because it is not believed to be safe or effective, although a version of Ponderex and the active ingredient in Monduretic are prescribed here.

He said he can't understand the purpose of Redotex, which combines a stimulant and a depressant — both controlled substances in the U.S. — that would seem to cancel each other out.

The ingredient in the diuretic is prescribed in the U.S. for high blood pressure, but unsupervised use can cause potassium depletion and heart problems, Heaton said.

Taking all three in combination, as prescribed in Mexico, is especially dangerous, he said. Lochner and Heaton said side effects from the drugs range from severe diarrhea and pneumonia to psychosis.

The drugs apparently are prescribed primarily at a few weight loss clinics in Nuevo Laredo, Heaton said. All patients receive the same regimen and their medical histories are not taken before the prescriptions are issued, he said.

Despite the hazards, the American desire to be thin is creating large demand for the drugs, the officials said.

Police Beat

The following were reported to the University Police Department from Dec. 15 through Tuesday:

MISDEMEANOR THEFT:

- Eight bicycles were stolen.
- Four backpacks were stolen.
- A man reported observing three men tear a phone from the wall of A-1 Lounge on the Quadrangle.

• A man reported that the "Bernie's" sign had been removed from the outside of the Underground restaurant located beneath Sbsa Dining Hall.

• While on patrol, an officer noticed that the "No Mopeds, Motorcycles, or Scooters" sign had been removed from the north side of the Systems Mall.

BURGLARY OF A HABITATION:

• A student reported that a window was forced open and his blue, 12-speed bicycle was stolen from his room.

• A student reported that someone entered her locked dorm room and removed various types of jewelry.

• A student reported his stereo receiver and tape player missing from his unlocked room.

CRIMINAL MISCHIEF:

• A student reported that she had discovered a hole in the glass window of her dorm room. Investigation revealed that the damage apparently was caused by a projectile fired from an air gun or similar device. Two other windows in the same dormitory had undergone similar damage.

• Two fires were extinguished by the College Station Fire Department in trash dumpsters after the fire was reported near Davis-Gary Hall.

• A man reported that he found a shirt burning on the floor after responding to an activated fire alarm.

• An officer checking a dorm laundry room noticed a fire extinguisher had been removed from the wall and that the contents had been sprayed over the inside of the laundry room.

• A man reported that someone on the third floor of the Langford Architecture Center had

thrown several pieces of cardboard of various sizes out of a window.

DISORDERLY CONDUCT:

• A student reported that he had been orally threatened and pushed by another student. The student said the confrontation resulted from an earlier incident. The conflict has been referred to student affairs.

• A student reported that he observed a male about 20 years old leave a Commons-area viewing room and urinate on a wall. The investigation is continuing.

ASSAULT:

• A student reported that while she was on her way to finish her ex-boyfriend approached her, took her umbrella and poured a bucket of milky liquid on her. He then used abusive language. The incident has been referred to student affairs.

• A student said he assaulted a female student because he was deeply hurt when she asked her roommate to help her with homework. He said he had become extremely upset after ending a very close relationship with her. The student said the substance he threw on her was a mixture of water, milk and anything else he found in his refrigerator. If the student seeks counseling, no charges will be filed.

INDECENT EXPOSURE:

• A student reported that about 11:30 p.m. she heard knocking at her window. After opening the window, she observed a male in his 20s wearing a green shirt and dark pants exposing himself.

• A woman reported that while running near a campus parking lot a man exposed himself to her.

HARASSMENT:

• A student reported that she had received a harassing note attached to her dorm room door.

ARSON:

• An officer responded to report of an explosion in the Dorm 9 area. After searching the area, the officer found no evidence as to the source of the explosion. The investigation, however, is continuing.

Murder case dropped against former coach

HOUSTON (AP) — A former Lamar University assistant football coach who spent more than seven years on death row was ordered freed Wednesday by a judge.

State District Judge Johnny Kolenda dismissed the capital murder charge against Vernon Eugene McManus, 43, because the state's key witness refused to testify in a new trial.

"Thank the Lord, it's all over with," McManus said after the hearing. "It really hasn't sunk in yet."

McManus was sent to death row at the Texas Department of Corrections in June 1977, after he was sentenced for arranging the slayings of Paul and Mary Cantrell and killing Cantrell, an electrical contractor.

But a federal judge, citing an error in jury selection, overturned the 1977 conviction in 1984 and ordered a new trial. McManus was transferred from TDC to the Harris County Jail in August 1983, where he remained pending a new trial.

That trial was to have started Wednesday.

Kolenda dismissed the charge after prosecutors filed a motion saying they had insufficient evidence for a conviction.

Prosecutors were denied crucial evidence linking the former coach to the 1976 killings of the Cantrells,

Harris County District Attorney John B. Holmes Jr. said.

Holmes said prosecutors tried Tuesday afternoon to convince the daughter of the slain couple, Paula Cantrell Derese, to testify after Kolenda refused to allow her previous testimony into the man's retrial.

The 37-year-old woman, serving two concurrent life sentences in connection with her parents' slayings, has refused to cooperate with officials because she said they reneged on a deal to shorten her prison term.

She said she testified against her former boss because authorities promised her sentence would be commuted to credit for time served, her lawyer, Ken McLean said.

Kolenda said he refused to allow the woman's previous testimony to be used in the new trial because of a conflict of interest between Don Smith, the attorney who represented McManus in his trial, and McManus' former wife, Regina.

But the judge on Tuesday did permit the transcript of pool hustler Ben Milton Tabor to be played after he refused to repeat his testimony. He is serving a 35-year prison sentence for the slaying of a woman.

During the first trial, Tabor testified that he took \$12,000 from McManus to kill the Cantrells and then failed to carry out the contract.

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