

WASHINGTON COMMENTS

Sen. Frank Murkowski



"Designer Drugs" - The Latest Epidemic

The latest horror in our war against drugs is being produced by illegal chemists in secret laboratories. These chemists are turning out synthetic versions of heroin and cocaine - more commonly known as "designer drugs" - that are indistinguishable from the real thing except that they are stronger and potentially more lethal. Federal drug enforcement officials testified before Congress recently that designer drugs have caused more than 100 deaths in the last six months.

The recent outbreak of designer drugs will be one of the issues discussed during a U.S. Senate hearing I will chair on August 30th in Anchorage to examine the scope of drug and alcohol abuse in Alaska. Testimony will be heard from Alaska law enforcement officials, drug users, drug and alcohol rehabilitation counselors, and state health and drug officials.

Testimony on designer drugs will be of special importance. Some of these drugs are 1,000 to 6,000 times stronger than heroin - before being "cut" or diluted - and produce accelerated aging, acute paranoia and symptoms similar to Parkinson's Disease in their users. At this time, these symptoms appear to be irreversible.

The producers of these drugs can potentially make millions of dollars with a minimal investment in chemicals and equipment. In testimony before the Senate Subcommittee on Children, Families, Alcoholism and Drugs, we were advised that with just \$50 worth of materials - easily purchased at local drug and hardware stores - 100 million doses of synthetic narcotics can be created. As reported in the New York Times, drug authorities in California report that one chemist working an eight hour day could supply the nation's daily heroin demand. The potential cost to society of the widespread distribution of these synthetic drugs is staggering.

Up until now, synthetic drugs have been found mainly in California and other Western states. However, because of the high profits involved there is a very real possibility of the widespread distribution of these deadly drugs. Both Congress and the Administration are addressing this threat by working toward the quick passage of a bill which outlaws the manufacturing, distribution, or possession of designer drugs. I am a cosponsor of this important legislation, the Designer Drugs Act of 1985.

This is just one facet in our war against drug abuse. The use of illegal drugs in the United States has spread at an unprecedented rate and has touched every segment of our society.

Alaska is part of this national trend. The Alaska Statewide Drug Enforcement Agency reports that cocaine is available in epidemic proportions and is 80 to 90 percent pure. A year ago the cocaine seized was reported to be 20 to 30 percent pure. With facts like this staring us in the face we cannot afford to sit idly by.

We must continue our aggressive campaign on all fronts - through improved law enforcement programs, health care and prevention, and through the elimination of foreign assistance to nations that refuse to work to decrease the export of drugs from their countries.