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**METRO**

Last modified 9/17/2007 - 5:15 am  
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## Prescription drugs kick DUI up a notch

**A NEW TREND: Charges of driving under the influence used to stem mainly from alcohol abuse. SEVERAL TYPES OF OFFENDERS: Some combine alcohol and drugs on purpose, while others ignore warnings.**

By Dana Treen, The Times-Union

When Clay County Sheriff's Deputy Donald Sutherland arrived at the car crash on Florida 16 near Camp Blanding, one of the drivers involved had the telltale slurred speech and bloodshot eyes of someone who had been drinking.



JOHN PEMBERTON/The Times-Union  
Jacksonville Sheriff's Office DUI officer Doug Cullen watches a man suspected of driving under the influence walk a masking-tape line as part of a field sobriety test in early September. Northeast Florida law enforcement authorities say DUI charges increasingly stem from a combination of alcohol and drug use by drivers, many of whom ignore warning labels on prescription medications.



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But there was something more, something unusual.

"You could tell there was more there than alcohol," Sutherland said. "Her ankle was severely deformed from the crash and I asked her and she said it was always that way. She was acting as if it was nothing."

Her ankle was broken.

"The normal person would have been screaming," Sutherland said.

The driver, Frances McCauley-Melcolm, was convicted in August of DUI manslaughter and reckless driving in that 2005 wreck that took the life of an 80-year-old woman in the other vehicle.

McCauley-Melcolm's blood-alcohol level four hours after the crash was slightly below the level at which a driver is presumed impaired, but an expert testified at the trial it had been above the limit at the time of the accident.

There was more.

In an interview at the hospital after the crash, McCauley-Melcolm told Sutherland she had been drinking and had taken Xanax as well as Tylenol with codeine. Blood tests showed she had Xanax and evidence of other drugs in her system, said Assistant State Attorney Rebecca Zima, who prosecuted the case.

Law enforcement officers increasingly are seeing cases in which drivers are impaired by more than drink.

Of 45 Northeast Florida drivers who died with alcohol in their systems in 2000, nine also had drugs such as codeine and cocaine in their systems, according to traffic death statistics from medical examiners. In

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2006, of 54 who had been drinking before they died, 20 tested positive for the same kinds of drugs.

Whether alone or in combination with alcohol, drugs - often legitimately prescribed - are involved in more and more driving arrests.

One of the drugs accounted for in the 2006 statistics by medical examiners in Duval and St. Johns counties was alprazolam, the generic name for Xanax.

Drugs such as Xanax and OxyContin increase the impact of alcohol, said professor Paul Doering of the College of Pharmacy at the University of Florida.

Some estimates say 25 percent of all drug abuse involves prescription medications.

"That's all the rage today is abuse of prescription drugs," Doering said. Combining some prescription drugs with alcohol multiplies the impact. Washing down a Xanax with a few beers can put the abuser "up there with the other drunks," he said.

"I call it the new math," Doering said. "One plus one equals three. Despite the labels put on prescriptions, people don't seem to get the message."

St. Johns County Sheriff's Deputy Dave Rosado is trained as a drug-recognition expert and is called in on cases in which officers believe a driver is impaired by drugs and alcohol or by drugs alone.

In August, Rosado handled a case involving a man driving with his 2-year-old daughter in the truck.

Before Rosado was called, an officer in the northwest part of the county was almost hit by a green pickup truck. When Jason Michael Franklin, 24, was pulled over, his pupils differed in size, his hands were shaking and his speech slurred, according to police reports.

No alcohol was detected in a breath test but the man said he had taken a drug used to treat seizures and panic attacks. Bottles of generic versions of the prescription drugs Xanax and Soma were found in the truck, the arrest report said.

"When I met him at the jail, he couldn't stay awake," Rosado said. "He fell asleep five or six times during the evaluation."

Franklin was charged with driving under the influence.

Officer Darrell Edmonds of the Jacksonville Sheriff's Office became certified as a drug-recognition expert in 1999. As part of the department's DUI team, Edmonds has seen the problem evolve.

"It's progressively getting worse," he said. "People don't think it is inappropriate to work and drive with a prescription drug."

Edmonds said he still sees people impaired with street drugs such as PCP, cocaine and heroin, but those are in the minority.

"It is not as frequent as prescription medication," he said.

Edmonds said he sees three categories of drivers impaired by drugs.

One is the person who was properly taking the medicine but shouldn't have been driving. The second is someone he placed in the "doctor shopping" category because they actively seek drugs. Then there is the alcoholic who wants to enhance the euphoria.

Florida Highway Patrol Lt. Bill Leeper said state law doesn't distinguish between alcohol and drugs in considering a driver's impairment.

Many prescription drugs come with warning labels," he said. "Motorists need to heed those warnings."

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