A Boston man walking cross-country to raise awareness about chronic pain stopped in Oklahoma City last week to talk about treatment options and roadblocks during an OU Medical Center forum.

Attorney General Drew Edmondson complained during the forum about law enforcement efforts that restrict doctors from prescribing controlled medication for chronic pain.

Dennis Kinch, a chronic pain sufferer and spokesman for the National Pain Foundation, talked during Thursday's forum about the health problems that took away everything he loved. Kinch left Chicago in September on a walking trip along U.S. Highway 66 to raise awareness about chronic pain and options available.

"As I watched them (other pain sufferers), I said I couldn't let any more families be broken up over pain. I couldn't let any more people be suicidal, because that's where I was," Kinch said.

Kinch said he had chronic pain for four years before he was diagnosed with Paget's disease and ankylosing spondylitis -- degenerative spinal bone and joint diseases. By that time he had lost his job, children, insurance and home and began losing his ability to walk.

After moving from Colorado to Boston, he received treatment at the Massachusetts General Hospital Pain Center, where he learned how to cope with his pain and how to walk again.

Relief roadblocks
Because controlled painkillers are the top method of controlling chronic pain, doctors often face scrutiny from the legal world, Edmondson said.

Edmondson said doctors often hesitate to prescribe pain management drugs to avoid investigations by the federal Drug Enforcement Administration or the state department of Narcotics and Dangerous Drug Control.

"If I ever have serious health problems, the last thing I want to see between me and my doctor is a DEA agent," Edmondson said.
Such investigations have instilled a climate of fear among doctors, said Dr. Gretchen Wienecke, an OU Physicians pain specialist.

New treatments such as spinal cord stimulation, Botox injections and killer sea snail venom injections have shown promise as alternatives to narcotic analgesic therapies, she said.

"There is no magic bullet, unfortunately. I tell my patients I can't cure their pain, but I can try to make it more bearable," Wienecke said.

Insurance is another roadblock to pain management, Kinch said. One company recently made him wait two weeks for a Neurontin prescription, so doctors gave him Percoset in the meantime. He immediately went to the streets and traded the pills for what he needed, he said.

"I have to spend a lot of time fighting with the system. It isn't right," he said.

Despite the problems, Kinch said proper treatment of his pain has helped him regain the hope sufferers usually lose.

"Pain's a dark tunnel, but there's light at the end of that tunnel," he said. "With this walk I'm trying to show if you do it little by little and string it all together, look how productive you can be."

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