

OxyContin maker Purdue Pharma pleads guilty to misleading public

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ROANOKE, Virginia: The maker of the powerful painkiller OxyContin and three of its current and former executives pleaded guilty Thursday to misleading the public about the drug's risk of addiction, a federal prosecutor and the company said.

Purdue Pharma L.P., its president, top lawyer and former chief medical officer will pay \$634.5 million (€469 million) in fines for claiming the drug was less addictive and less subject to abuse than other pain medications, U.S. Attorney John Brownlee said in a news release.

The plea comes two days after the Stamford, Connecticut-based company agreed to pay \$19.5 million (€14.4 million) to 26 states and the District of Columbia to settle complaints that it encouraged physicians to overprescribe OxyContin.

"With its OxyContin, Purdue unleashed a highly abusable, addictive, and potentially dangerous drug on an unsuspecting and unknowing public," Brownlee said. "For these misrepresentations and crimes, Purdue and its executives have been brought to justice."

Privately held Purdue Pharma said it accepted responsibility for its employees' actions.

"During the past six years, we have implemented changes to our internal training, compliance and monitoring systems that seek to assure that similar events do not occur again," the company said in a news release.

OxyContin, a trade name for oxycodone, is a time-release painkiller that can be highly addictive. Designed to be swallowed whole and digested over 12 hours, the pills can produce a heroin-like high if crushed and then swallowed, snorted or injected.

From 1996 to 2001, the number of oxycodone-related deaths nationwide increased 400 percent while the annual number of OxyContin prescriptions increased nearly 20-fold, according to a report by the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration. In 2002, the DEA said the drug caused 146 deaths and contributed to another 318.

In western Virginia, 228 people died from overdoses of oxycodone from 1996 to 2005, Brownlee said.

The fines will be distributed to state and federal law enforcement agencies, the federal government, federal and state Medicaid programs, a Virginia prescription monitoring program and individuals who had sued the company.