Growing Use of Ketamine Gets a Closer Look After Perry’s Death

**By Rolfe Winkler and Brianna Abbott**

Matthew Perry’s death from the effects of ketamine brought new scrutiny to the booming business to prescribe the powerful anesthetic to patients in clinics and online.

Perry was receiving ketamine infusions for depression and anxiety before he was found unresponsive in the pool at his Pacific Palisades, Calif., home on Oct. 28. Drowning, coronary artery disease and effects of buprenorphine, a medication used to treat opioid-use disorder, contributed to his accidental death, the autopsy report released on Friday said.

The high level of ketamine in his blood when he died at 54 years old couldn’t have come from his last known treatment at a clinic a week and a half before his death, the report said. Traces of the drug usually linger in the blood for a few days. It isn’t known whether Perry purchased more ketamine from another provider or the illicit market. “This really should be a wake-up call that ketamine needs to be used appropriately,” said Dr. Gerard Sanacora, director of Yale University’s depression-research program.

He noted that the Food and Drug Administration’s approval of a version of ketamine for treatment-resistant depression requires that the drug be given under a healthcare professional’s observation in a clinical setting. The treatment approved in 2019 requires follow-up reporting to track adverse events, and it isn’t approved for at-home use. The FDA didn’t respond to a request for comment.

With safeguards in place, the treatment has been shown to be safe and effective, doctors said. But regulators and doctors have expressed concern over ketamine’s expanding use and the dangers of taking it at home without supervision.

Ketamine has been used in hospitals and clinics for decades to numb people during surgeries. It is also a common party drug, nicknamed Special K, that has hallucinogenic properties and creates an out-o-body feeling.

Clinics have opened across the country to administer it off-label to treat severe depression, other mental -health conditions and chronic pain. Researchers are studying whether ketamine could help treat substance-use disorders and doctors sometimes prescribe it for that purpose. Others don’t prescribe it to people with a history of addiction. Online providers started prescribing the drug for home use during the Covid-19 pandemic, thanks to relaxed federal rules on remote prescription. Also, telehealth providers can advertise drugs in ways many pharmaceutical companies can’t. Ads by Mindbloom, one online ketamine provider, have noted that ketamine has “minimal side effects” without listing them, and claimed that ketamine works more effectively than antidepressants.

Mindbloom said its ketamine treatment has helped thousands of people with depression and that its safeguards include monitoring during sessions. It didn’t comment on its advertising but in the past has said its ads comply with all appliable regulations.

Safety concerns with ketamine include increases in blood pressure, respiratory depression, and bladder problems, according to the FDA. People can also get into accidents if taking the drug unsupervised, doctors said.

Ketamine clinics often use intravenous infusions of injections and have medical staff monitor patients during treatment. At home, patients use oral lozenges or nasal sprays. The FDA has warned about the use of compounded ketamine, including lozenges and sprays. Its warnings in 2022 and this October said the lack of monitoring when the drug is prescribed online and used at home puts patients at risk.

Mindbloom and other online providers often instruct patients to have someone monitor them at home while they take the drug.

The American Society of Ketamine Physicians, Psychotherapists said it is working on ethical and scientific standards for providers to use, including for at-home prescribing and educating on best practices.

“While the evidence of its efficacy is overwhelming, ketamine as a mental-health treatment is still off-label and unregulated,” Dr. Sandhya Prashad, the group’s president, said earlier this month. “This has created a ‘Wild West’ dynamic.”