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UPDATE 2-Kennedy case puts Ambien again under spotlight

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(Adds 'Ambien zombies' comment, paragraphs 10-12)

By Kim Dixon

CHICAGO, May 5 (Reuters) - U.S. Rep. Patrick Kennedy's statement that he used Sanof sleep drug Ambien to explain how he was involved in a late-night car crash has revived c whether the drug causes side effects like sleepwalking and binge eating.

The Rhode Island Democrat had also taken the prescription anti-nausea drug phenergar crashing his car into a security barrier in Washington early on Thursday morning. No one incident, but Kennedy said on Friday he was checking himself into a program for further chronic addiction to prescription pain pills.

"I simply do not remember getting out of bed, being pulled over by police or being cited f infractions," Kennedy told a news conference. "I am deeply concerned about my reactor medication and my lack of knowledge of the accident that evening."

On Thursday, Kennedy said that after a series of votes on Wednesday night he took the amount of phenergan, which treats gastroenteritis, as well as Ambien. He said he had nc alcohol.

Sanofi-Aventis (SASY.PA: [Quote](#), [Profile](#), [Research](#)) says Ambien, used by millions of pe introduction in 1993, has lulled patients to sleep for 12 billion nights in the U.S. It says slr rare side effect and it stands by the drug's safety.

But researchers at Hennepin County Medical Center in Minnesota have identified more t cases of dangerous sleepwalking among people who took Ambien, and they believe the more common than the company says.

"We are seeing pretty extreme expressions of sleepwalking

-- like getting into a car and driving," said Michel Cramer-Bornemann, a researcher at the when we remove the Ambien, it is resolved."

The data, to be submitted for publication in several months, is still anecdotal. "But good s with observation," he said.

Michael Sateia, chief of sleep medicine at Dartmouth Medical School, said, "There is whi on this particular agent, but we need to be cautious about jumping to conclusions."

'AMBIEN ZOMBIES'

The high-profile cases are leading some lawyers to seize the opportunity.

"I call them Ambien zombies," said Susan Chana Lask, an attorney who filed a suit in U.S. District Court in Manhattan in March for clients who charge Ambien caused them to do things like "sleep drive."

"We are going to start using this as a defense for people who were using it when they get driving under the influence. The cops can't figure it out because the person is really loop disoriented," Lask said.

About 30 million people in the United States take sleep medications, according to the American Academy of Sleep Medicine and Ambien leads the market by far. By some counts, that is a jump in the use of such drugs since the beginning of the decade.

Serious suspected side effects are short-term memory loss and cases of patients involved in accidents a day after taking the drug who complained they still felt drugged.

Sanofi has said about 4 percent of people might sleepwalk with or without the drug.

That estimate is a bit high, according to Donna Arand, president of the American Insomni

She explained that sleepwalking occurs when a patient's brain goes into the deepest cycle and has trouble getting back into the lighter cycles. "You end up with a sleeping brain in your body," she said.

Sateia of Dartmouth suggested that Sanofi should re-examine the original trial data it submitted to regulators when it won approval.

(Additional reporting by Randall Mikkelsen in Washington and Anna Driver in New York)

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