

Pharmacists' role in addressing opioid abuse, addiction, and diversion

American Pharmacists Association

Abstract

Objective: To review the scope of the problem of opioid misuse; explore pharmacists' roles and responsibilities regarding opioid use; discuss existing laws, guidelines, and regulations governing opioid management; identify potential patient and practice management strategies to address opioid abuse; and disseminate leader insights on these issues.

Data sources: Information presented at a conference convened by the American Pharmacists Association (Pharmacists' Role in Addressing Opioid Abuse, Addiction, and Diversion; held November 15, 2012) and discussed in conference workgroups, as well as related information from the literature.

Summary: Opioid misuse, abuse, and diversion has grown dramatically since the early 1990s and affects public health considerably. In 2011, more individuals died from drug overdoses than from motor vehicle accidents. Strategies are available that pharmacists can use to reduce the likelihood of opioid misuse, abuse, and diversion while minimizing the impact on legitimate pain management efforts. These strategies and tools can be used to support (1) the assessment of prescriptions that are presented for opioid medications, (2) the management of patients receiving opioids, and (3) follow-up options when misuse, abuse, or diversion has been identified.

Conclusion: Implementation of systems and processes that support pharmacist management of opioid-related issues under financially viable business models would create a number of opportunities to improve patient care.

Keywords: Addiction, laws and regulations, medication therapy management, opioids, pain management, pharmacists, pharmacy.

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Issues for pharmacists managing opioids

Although opioids are widely regarded as the most effective agents for treating many types of pain, they also have the potential to be misused and abused. These features make the management of opioids complex. When dispensing opioids, pharmacists have a responsibility to ensure that patients in pain receive appropriately prescribed opioids. This responsibility must be balanced with the responsibility not to permit the misuse or diversion of controlled substances by patients or other individuals. Definitions related to the use of opioids can be found in Table 1.^{1,2}

Pharmacists' responsibilities regarding opioids often can conflict with each other. Dispensing opioids without carefully assessing each prescription may increase misuse and diversion. On the other hand, efforts to reduce misuse and diversion may result in denying legitimate patients medications or result in the creation of additional barriers for pain patients. Pharmacists must manage these responsibilities within an environment of potential regulatory scrutiny if they inadvertently dispense medications to diverters or abusers. Thus, it is imperative that pharmacists carefully balance these two responsibilities in their practice.

At a Glance

Synopsis: The misuse, abuse, and diversion of opioids have increased dramatically since the early 1990s, resulting in a considerable impact on public health. Participants at a conference convened by the American Pharmacists Association discussed a number of tools and strategies that can help address opioid abuse, addiction, and diversion and benefit public health. To address this critical issue, pharmacists can support (1) the assessment of prescriptions that are presented for opioid medications, (2) the management of patients receiving opioids, and (3) follow-up options when misuse, abuse, or diversion has been identified.

Analysis: Ensuring access to opioids for patients who have a legitimate need while working to prevent misuse, abuse, and diversion is a complex balancing act for pharmacists. In addition to complying with federal and state regulations governing controlled substances, pharmacists must exercise diligence and careful judgment. They must assess the appropriateness of opioid prescriptions, weigh the risks and benefits of opioids for individual patients, and attempt to discern whether patients are presenting legitimate prescriptions. Pharmacists also must consider the importance of their own physical safety and security when working with controlled substances.

Guidance and tools are available that may help pharmacists achieve a balance between patient care and management of opioids. These include federal and state laws, state practice standards, and store-level policies. However, current evidence suggests that achieving an appropriate balance is a struggle for pharmacists.³

Pharmacists' role in addressing opioid abuse, addiction, and diversion

To engage national leaders in a discussion about opioid abuse, addiction, and diversion and to explore strategies that pharmacists could use to balance their responsibilities related to opioids, the American Pharmacists Association (APhA) convened a conference, Pharmacists' Role in Addressing Opioid Abuse, Addiction, and Diversion, on November 15, 2012. The conference was attended by subject matter experts and pharmacy thought leaders.

Conference participants (Table 2) heard a series of presentations related to opioid misuse and abuse and to opioid management laws, regulations, guidelines, and tools. The presentations were followed by facilitated workgroup sessions and group discussion focused on tools and strategies that can be used to address opioid-related issues in pharmacy practice.

This article presents information from conference presentations and discussions. Supporting information from the literature is provided in the appendices. This article should not be considered a set of best practice recommendations. Rather, it reports on the collective dialogue among pharmacy thought leaders and is intended to provide information for pharmacists, pharmacies, and other stakeholders who grapple with this issue.

Issues surrounding opioid misuse and management strategies

Conference presentations focused on a variety of issues, including data regarding use and abuse of opioids, federal oversight of opioid use, state-level regulation of opioids, and guidance from professional societies.

Data regarding use and abuse of opioids

The conference began with a look at data that quantify the current problem of opioid misuse and abuse. A dramatic increase in the misuse and abuse of opioids occurred in the previous decade, creating a public health issue that has been called an epidemic. In 2011, 6.1 million Americans reported current nonmedical use of prescription drugs.⁴ The cost of prescription drug abuse was \$55.7 billion in 2007, including \$24.7 billion in direct health care costs.⁵

Along with the rise in misuse and abuse of opioids, the number of drug overdose deaths in the United States rose dramatically through the 1990s and 2000s. In 2010, more people in the United States died from drug overdoses than from motor vehicle accidents (Figure 1).^{6,7}

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