The Role of Health Care Providers in Reducing Prescription Drug Abuse and Overdose Deaths in Los Angeles: Policy- and Clinic-Level Interventions

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Prescription drug overdoses are now the leading cause of injury death in the U.S. surpassing deaths from motor vehicle accidents and from gun homicides. While the U.S. comprises less than 5% of the global population, it uses 80% of the world’s opioids. Years of unimpeded opioid prescribing by physicians has contributed to our national opioid epidemic of addiction, worsened health outcomes, and increased deaths from overdose. Prescription drug abuse has become one of the fastest growing public health concerns in the country and is of particular relevance in primary care settings. The complexity of the opioid crisis requires a culture change in how health care providers and society view and respond to pain and addiction.

This article will highlight both policy and clinical-level interventions for health care providers to reduce prescription drug abuse and overdose deaths in Los Angeles County.

Policy-Level Interventions

Be familiar with and support Safe Med LA (www.SafeMedLA.org)

Safe Med LA is a countywide coalition of health professionals working together to reduce prescription drug abuse and overdose deaths in Los Angeles. As the causes of prescription drug abuse are multifaceted and complex, Safe Med LA has designed a multi-pronged strategy to apply evidence-based interventions in nine key action team areas, which are summarized below.

1. Safe Prescribing in Medical Practice – Implementing safe pain prescribing guidelines in emergency departments, urgent care centers, medical clinics, and dental practices to reduce over-prescribing, misuse, abuse, and diversion.

2. Safe Prescribing in Pharmacy Practice – Ensuring that pharmacists, who are often the last health professionals to interact with patients prior to them receiving opioids, have the training and tools to support safe prescribing and to furnish naloxone.

3. Medication-Assisted Treatment – Expanding access to medication-assisted addiction treatments such as buprenorphine and long-acting injectable naltrexone.


5. Safe Drug Disposal – Decreasing the supply of unused drugs in homes and the community by ensuring access to convenient, safe, and environmentally responsible drug disposal programs.


7. CURES – Increasing the number of prescribers using California’s Prescription Drug Monitoring Program, known as CURES 2.0. Through CURES, health care providers can identify possible patterns of controlled substance abuse and enhance their prescribing decisions to combat prescription drug abuse.

8. Law Enforcement – Identifying opportunities to educate and train the criminal justice community to better navigate the interface between public health and law enforcement. Collaborating with law enforcement to identify and address improper practices such as indiscriminate prescribing by “pill mills” and inappropriate “doctor shopping”.

9. Data Collection – Increasing data collection and information sharing across systems, agencies and organizations to effectively coordinate care and interventions to reduce overprescribing, misuse, and diversion of prescription drugs, while also encouraging treatment.

With the collective impact of successful interventions in these nine areas, Safe Med LA plans to reduce prescription drug abuse deaths in Los Angeles County by at least 20% by 2020. Providers can support Safe Med LA initiatives by sharing information with colleagues, by joining a Safe Med LA action team, as well as by implementing interventions in their practices (see clinic-level interventions below).

http://rx.ph.lacounty.gov/RxOpioid0517
Clinic-Level Interventions

An estimated 20% of patients presenting to physician offices with non-cancer pain symptoms or pain-related diagnoses (including acute and chronic pain) receive an opioid prescription. Prescriptions by primary care providers (PCPs) account for nearly half of all dispensed opioid prescriptions in the U.S. and this prescribing rate continues to grow. For this reason, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) created guidelines specifically for PCPs on prescribing opioids for chronic pain.

Here are several clinic-level interventions recommended by Safe Med LA and/or the CDC to help reduce drug abuse and overdose deaths.

- **Screen patients for substance misuse and talk with them about the need for help, when necessary**
  
  It is estimated that 20-45% of adult patients in primary care have substance use disorders but less than 10% are diagnosed in the primary care setting.
  
  "How many times in the past year have you used an illegal drug or used a prescription medication for nonmedical reasons?" is a validated single question screening test for drug use in primary care.

- **Adopt safe prescribing practices**
  
  Follow the CDC Guideline for Prescribing Opioids for Chronic Pain, including three key principles:

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<tr>
<th>Three Key Principles for Prescribing Opioids for Chronic Pain</th>
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<tr>
<td>1. Use non-opioid therapies (physical therapy, cognitive behavioral therapy and non-opioid medications such as anti-inflammatories).</td>
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<td>2. When opioids are necessary:</td>
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<td>a. Start with the lowest effective dose and increase slowly and judiciously.</td>
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<td>b. Start with immediate-release formulations instead of long-acting opioids, as needed.</td>
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<td>c. Only prescribe enough for the expected duration of pain.</td>
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<td>3. Regularly monitor patients to make sure that the opioids are improving pain and functioning without causing harm.</td>
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**Conclusion**

Addressing the opioid crisis requires a culture change in how society views pain and what to do when our reliance on painkillers become problematic. Physicians and other health care providers are in a unique and respected position to shape our community’s perspective on how to view and respond to pain. We now know that the message of “zero pain” has contributed to the overuse and misuse of painkillers and needs to be reframed to “functional tolerance”. Adopting safe prescribing practices across systems and in clinics is a critical step in changing the culture of pain management, as is ensuring that patients have access to medication-assisted addiction treatment to treat active addiction and naloxone to reduce the likelihood of opioid overdose deaths.

The Safe Med LA goal to reduce prescription drug abuse deaths in LA County requires active support from the provider community. Prescription drug abuse deaths can and will be reduced in Los Angeles County if every health care provider takes action at the clinical and/or policy level. Visit the DPH Substance Abuse and Prevention Control Program website for more local resources for patients and providers. Health care providers have contributed to the local and national epidemic of prescription drug abuse; now we have the opportunity to be part of the solution.

**Additional Resources**

**Los Angeles Referrals for Specialty SUD Treatment**

- Primary care clinics and individuals can initiate a referral or self-referral by calling the Substance Abuse Prevention and Control resource line at (888)742-7900; once the caller has indicated where the person needing SUD treatment lives, they are routed to their local Community Assessment Service Center (CASC).

**Screening for SUD**

- Evidence-Based Screening Tools for Adult and Adolescents

**Medication-Assisted Treatment**

- Medication Assisted Treatment Training Materials and Resources (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration)
- MATx Mobile App to support MAT for Opioid Use Disorders

**CDC Safe Prescribing Guidelines**

- At-a-Glance-Guidelines for Prescribing Opioids for Chronic Pain [4 page summary]
- Guideline for Prescribing Opioids for Chronic Pain — United States, 2016 [full guidelines]

http://rx.ph.lacounty.gov/RxOpioid0517
References