

Doctors can help fight drug abuse with prescription checks: Op-ed

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Physicians should use the New Jersey Prescription Monitoring Program database as a powerful, lifesaving tool in the fight against prescription drug abuse.

By Steve C. Lee

Last year, a Mercer County physician logged onto the New Jersey Prescription Monitoring Program database to search prescriptions written in his name. The results shocked him. The doctor discovered his identity had been stolen in a massive prescription fraud scheme.

One or more criminals had illegally obtained his prescription pad and were using it to forge prescriptions for oxycodone, a widely abused narcotic painkiller. Within a month, 12 fraudulent patient names had been used to obtain 1,300 pills, sellable on the streets for \$25,000. If this physician hadn't searched NJPMP records, this illegal opiate distribution scheme might never have been detected.

This week, during National Prevention Week, acting Attorney General John J. Hoffman and I call upon New Jersey's health care community to make regular use of the NJPMP, as an everyday part of their practice. Prescribers who do so play a tremendous role in New Jersey's fight against the nationwide opiate abuse epidemic. As has been well-documented, abuse of prescription painkillers like oxycodone leads to addiction and death, and has become a gateway drug for heroin.

Maintained by the state Division of Consumer Affairs, the NJPMP collects detailed information on every prescription filled in New Jersey for controlled drugs or human growth hormone — more than 32 million prescriptions to date. Each record includes names of the patient, doctor and pharmacy; purchase date; type, dosage, and amount of medication; and the method of payment.

The NJPMP is available to all licensed health care practitioners authorized to prescribe or dispense medications. Physicians can search individual patients' prescribing patterns and learn, for example, whether a patient has engaged in "doctor shopping" — deceptively visiting multiple physicians, to obtain more narcotics than any one doctor would prescribe — or other patterns consistent with addiction or abuse.

Today, slightly more than 20 percent of New Jersey's eligible prescribers and pharmacists have registered to use the NJPMP. Given that the program is relatively new, that's an impressive adoption rate. It puts New Jersey on par with other states that make prescription-monitoring programs available to doctors for optional use.

But with the urgency of our drug-abuse crisis, New Jersey's health care community can and must do better. The NJPMP will not fulfill its potential to fight drug diversion until a significant majority of doctors register and consult it regularly when prescribing oxycodone and other controlled medications.

The Division of Consumer Affairs is doing everything it can to increase the rate at which prescribers and pharmacists bring the NJPMP into their daily practice. We are working to make it easier to enroll by permitting state-licensed practitioners to automatically register every year when they renew their authority to prescribe or dispense controlled drugs.

An upcoming step will be to expand the data available to doctors. Prescribers who use the NJPMP today can only find prescriptions filled in New Jersey; they will not learn whether a patient engaged suspicious prescription-based activity across state lines. Through future partnerships with neighboring states, we'll soon be able to obtain data on prescriptions filled outside New Jersey.

The search of a patient's prescription-drug history takes less than a minute, even on a laptop during a patient visit. But none of our efforts will have a substantial impact until the health care community fully commits to the program.

As the Mercer County example shows, this database can help doctors protect the integrity of their medical licenses. More importantly, it is a powerful, lifesaving tool in the fight against prescription drug abuse.

Steve C. Lee is acting director of the New Jersey Division of Consumer Affairs.