ONC Plans Data Sharing and Rx Guidance to Combat Opioid Over-Prescribing

April 14, 2016

The Office of the National Coordinator for Health IT and other stakeholders are looking to use health IT to help clamp down on opioid overprescribing through data sharing, electronic prescribing and prescription guidance as the industry looks to address the opioid epidemic.

Andy Gettinger, chief medical information officer at ONC, laid out the agency's opioid crisis agenda at a Health Leadership Council panel on ways to prevent opioid abuse on Wednesday (April 13).

**ONC has three objectives, according to Gettinger:** support data sharing to ensure appropriate prescribing; enhance prescription monitoring and health IT to support appropriate pain management; and improve physician education to decrease inappropriate opioid prescribing.

Gettinger said ONC is focusing on identifying patients more accurately for physicians, making sure there is comprehensive information about him or her, and ensuring there are no artificial barriers like state lines blocking information.

Seth Joseph, vice president of corporate strategy at Surescripts, said his health information network helps to provide medication information about patients to physicians. With a patient's consent, he said, Surescripts can use its pharmacy contacts to send a comprehensive medication history from the previous 12 months about a patient to a physician.

**Joseph also touted electronic prescribing of controlled substances (EPCS) as a way to reduce illegal diversion.** He said EPCS requires doctors to be identity proofed and digitally sign every controlled substance prescription, which creates a secure prescribing channel. Joseph said this will prevent stolen prescription pads or abusers changing a hand-written prescription.

Gettinger said ONC also supports EPCS as a way to reduce illegal opioid prescribing. He added that ONC supports integrating prescription drug monitoring programs with health IT to improve prescribing, but said there are also problems with these data bases not being updated in real time. PDMPs are state-run and used to track the prescribing and dispensing of controlled prescription drugs to patients.

BlueCross BlueShield of Tennessee is implementing industry quantity limit standards and procedures for new long-acting opioid prescriptions; adopting state and CDC guidance; and pushing education efforts to try to cut down on overprescribing in a state that, according to Andrea Willis, senior vice president and chief medical officer of BCBS Tennessee, has the second highest rate of opioid prescriptions per person.
Daniel Luce, national director of pharmacy affairs at Walgreens, said diversion can be prevented by taking extra, unused opioids out of the medicine cabinets and disposing of them in drug disposal kiosks. The kiosks will be in 500 stores in 39 states and Washington by the end of the year. But Luce said there are legislative and regulatory barriers in some states preventing these kiosks, including a law that defines unused or expired medication as hazardous waste.

Luce also said Walgreens will make naloxone—the opioid overdose reversal drug—available without a prescription and with instruction from the pharmacy on how to administer it in 35 states and Washington by the end of the year. Some states do require a prescription, however, and Luce said Walgreens will work with those remaining states.

GOP Rep. Frank Guinta (NH) said existing laws encourage over-prescribing due to reimbursement policies and specifically called out Medicare, though he did not elaborate on which policies might contribute to prescribing problems.

Guinta is happy the Senate passed the Comprehensive Addiction and Recovery Act (CARA) -- a bill that would award grants to provide more education and create a task force charged with making suggestions for pain management and pain medication prescribing -- but complained that it was passed with no funding. However, Guinta said he believes the bill could be funded through the House appropriations process. Guinta also promoted his own legislation -- the Stop the Overdose Problem Already Becoming a Universal Substance Epidemic Act of 2015 or the STOP ABUSE Act--and said there are several pieces of opioid abuse-related legislation that he would like to bring to the House floor as a package.

“This is about saving people's lives and giving them a second chance,” Guinta said.

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