

'Drug shoppers' are beating the system

Pharmacists, MDs seek ways to end abuse

By: Jen Skerritt

Pharmacy experts admit the system for flagging "drug shoppers" isn't foolproof.

Ron Guse, Manitoba Pharmaceutical Association registrar, said people who want to get their hands on prescription painkillers to feed their addiction or resell on the street are often very skilled at persuading health-care providers they're in pain and at thwarting the systems in place to catch drug abusers.

Pharmacists have access to the Drug Programs Information Network (DPIN) -- a data entry system that keeps track of patient prescriptions. The tool enables pharmacists to see if a patient recently filled a prescription for painkillers like OxyContin or Tylenol 3, but Guse said this isn't always enough to catch "drug shoppers."

Pharmacists phone the prescribing physician if the DPIN flags that a patient might be abusing prescription painkillers, but Guse said the doctor is sometimes unavailable.

In some cases, the fact that a patient recently filled a prescriptions for painkillers might not be on file.

"These are rare occurrences, but the patient could demand to not put (their medication) in the DPIN system," Guse said, noting there's no law that requires pharmacists to enter medications into the database. "The patients that want to get medications for the purpose of diversion are very skilled."

Last week, doctors and pharmacists in Point Douglas held a meeting to brainstorm how to crack down on prescription drug abuse in response to the growing number of people reselling addictive painkillers like OxyContin, Tylenol 3, and other mood-altering drugs on the street. Police say the illicit practice turns lucrative profits, with eight tablets of OxyContin selling for about \$150.

The group is drafting a letter to Health Minister Theresa Oswald requesting that doctors gain access to the DPIN system that tracks patient prescriptions.

Oswald said she supports giving doctors increased access to patient information, but that building DPIN system into private doctor's offices may not be the best short-term solution. She says it is expensive and would take a couple of years to implement. Electronic health records are likely a better solution, she said, but the technology is still four to five years away.

Oswald said she'll work with the partners involved to improve the flow of information between doctors and pharmacists.

Kris Allen, manager at Main Street Pharmacy, said he refuses to fill some prescriptions every day, noting he's heard every excuse from patients asking for more narcotics. Some patients claim they dropped pills down the toilet, lost them on the bus, or need more pills since they're heading out of town.

Allen said some patients claim they don't have a Manitoba health number so their medication isn't entered in the data system. He said busy pharmacists often have trouble reaching time-strapped physicians, making it difficult to exchange information about a patient's prescription history.

Another big problem, he said, is that it's impossible to tell whether a patient is in pain.

"It's hard to know," Allen said. "You get people here and they're in really bad pain."

Daren Jorgenson, owner of Four Rivers Medical Clinic on Main Street, said he suspects most of the painkillers sold on the street are being diverted from grandma's medical cabinet -- not from patients coming to the North End to fill their prescriptions and resell them.

He said he's heard some impoverished seniors have been pressured by younger relatives to sell their painkillers. "That OxyContin the little old lady has in the North End has a greater chance of being diverted on the street."