

Winnipeg Free Press 25/03/2010

OxyContin battle heating up - Highly addictive painkillers face new restrictions

By: Jen Skerritt

The supply of highly addictive painkillers sold on city streets could soon dry up as officials launch a crackdown on the number of OxyContin prescriptions doled out by physicians.

Starting Friday, new prescriptions for OxyContin will be restricted to cancer patients or those with chronic conditions who can't tolerate or benefit from other medications. Doctors will need to contact Manitoba Health for approval before patients can obtain pharmacare coverage for their prescription.

What is OxyContin? It's a powerful opiate that's also a commonly prescribed painkiller. In the last two years, front-line addiction workers have seen an alarming rise in the number of Manitobans addicted to painkillers like OxyContin.

What is being done to curb abuse? Starting Friday, prescriptions will be restricted to cancer patients or those with chronic conditions who can't tolerate or benefit from other medications. More physicians will be trained to prescribe methadone to addicts to help ease the strain on current treatment programs. Manitoba is also launching a brochure campaign to educate physicians, pharmacists and patients about the drug.

Can opiate addiction be treated? Yes, with abstinence or methadone. Methadone is a synthetic opiate that suppresses symptoms of withdrawal, but is tightly controlled. Increased demand for methadone treatment in Manitoba has resulted in long waits for treatment. Some patients drop out of touch while on the waiting list, or resort to crime to feed their addiction. Others are prescribed doses of opiates to tide them over until they can get into the methadone program.

The new restrictions are part of a provincial plan to tackle the growing problem of OxyContin abuse among suburban teens and in the inner city, where more addicts are using needles to inject the opiates and get high.

The recent surge in prescription painkiller abuse caused the demand for methadone treatment to balloon, with some addicts dying waiting for it and others sitting on a wait list between six and 12 months long.

Healthy Living Minister Jim Rondeau said Wednesday the plan was drafted by a working group of addiction experts to reduce the amount of the opiate sold on the street and, in turn, the demand for methadone treatment services. The province will also spend \$35,000 to train more physicians how to prescribe methadone to reduce the strain on the Addiction Foundation of Manitoba's current treatment program.

Rondeau said stable patients can be transferred from the AFM's methadone program to family doctors at community clinics in order to make room for addicts languishing on lengthy wait lists.

"What this is doing is telling the doctors to have a sober second thought on the drugs they're prescribing," Rondeau said. "But that won't change the addictive behaviours instantly."

No one knows how long it will take before the province starts to see a drop in the number of Manitobans hooked on prescription opiates, but Rondeau anticipates the changes will have a "huge" impact.

Laura Goossen, Winnipeg director of the Addictions Foundation of Manitoba, said the hope is fewer OxyContin pills will translate into fewer opportunities for diversion and abuse, and that intake workers will be watching for any changes in the drugs that addicts report using.

However, Goossen said, there is a concern addicts may seek out other dangerous opiates -- including heroin and fentanyl -- if they are unable to find OxyContin.

There are close to 700 Manitobans on methadone, but people on the waiting list can't get in for treatment until someone drops out or has stabilized enough to get the drug from a community pharmacy. There are currently about 150 Manitobans waiting for treatment, and front-line addiction experts have reported a recent increase in the number of people who report using heroin and fentanyl.

Even if more physicians are able to prescribe methadone, Goossen said, it will take time to clear their wait lists and tend to the backlog of people awaiting treatment. "Often when there's less of a particular drug available, you'll see a higher demand for a different type of drug," Goossen said. "That's something we have to monitor."

Manitoba has seen an alarming surge in prescription painkiller abuse in the last two years.

Just four years ago, only about 10 people were admitted to Health Sciences Centre's detoxification unit for opiate abuse. Last year, that number ballooned to more than 300.