The Challenging Task of Stemming Opioid Abuse

By Kevin Bingham, Alix Michel, David Ward, and Randolph Gordon, MD

This article is a continuation of a feature story which appears in the 2014 First Quarter edition of Inside Medical Liability magazine.

A Call to Action: Educate Everyone

Families and Friends

If you have a teenage child, use babysitters and/or house sitters, or if there are teenage grandchildren who visit your home, you should look through your medicine cabinet, and immediately dispose of all unused or expired opioids and pain prescriptions. If you are thinking about selling your house, remember that some drug addicts pass themselves off as legitimate home buyers to steal prescription drugs from medicine cabinets and bedroom dressers. If you are hosting a Halloween, birthday, or New Year’s Eve party, it might be a good idea to store any prescription medications in a safe place to reduce the temptation beforehand.

Spread the word to family and friends about this extremely important issue. The FDA website provides a “What You Should Know” section on the disposal of unused medicines. It explains how to dispose of unused medicines, using medicine take-back programs, tips for disposing of medicine at home, a list of medicines that should be disposed by flushing, and other useful resources.

Expectant Mothers

Neonatal abstinence syndrome (NAS) comprises a cluster of problems that occur in a newborn after exposure to addictive illegal or prescription drugs during fetal development. Symptoms of NAS vary, and may include irritability, hypertonia (or
augmented muscle tone), tremors, intolerance to nourishment, seizures, and respiratory distress.

Spread the word to family and friends about the adverse impact of using prescription drugs during pregnancy. This is a very tough subject to discuss “off the cuff” with an expectant mother, but the power of social media now makes it possible to share stories with family and friends about the NAS epidemic. For example, on July 18, 2013, WGNS radio featured a story titled “BAD MILESTONE: 350th Baby Born This Year in TN Dependent on Drugs.” You could put a link on your homepage that would then become accessible by everyone else in your social network.

Workers

If you have a friend or family member who was injured at work, don’t be afraid to warn them about the dangers of long-term opioid use in the treatment of chronic pain. There are many stories in the news relating how opioid addiction snuck up on an injured worker, and, in some of the more tragic cases, resulted in the death of a family member. On January 27, 2011, USA Today published a story about a three-star general who became addicted to pain killers. He actually took roughly 60 Oxycontin pills in a 24-hour period. He was able to overcome his addiction and become an advocate for warning other soldiers of the dangers of opioid addiction.

It is important that employers, employees, and unions help educate fellow workers on the importance of taking an active role in managing one’s own pain. Awareness is key, and the “CAGE” questionnaire, often used by clinicians to identify alcoholism, is also helpful in assessing potential opioid addiction:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key Words</th>
<th>Question to Ask</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>Have you ever felt you should reduce your opioid intake?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>Have people annoyed you by criticizing your level of opioid consumption?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G</td>
<td>Have you ever felt guilty about the amount of opioids you are taking?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>Have you ever had an “eye-opener”—a time when you felt you couldn’t function in the morning without taking an opioid?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Kevin M. Bingham is a principal at Deloitte Consulting LLP in Hartford, CT and leader of Deloitte’s Claim Predictive Modeling and Medical Professional Liability practices, immediate past chairperson of the American Academy of Actuary’s Medical Professional Liability Committee, and an official Academy spokesperson. Alix Michel is an attorney at Michel & Ward in Chattanooga, Tennessee. David Ward is an attorney at Michel and Ward in Chattanooga, Tennessee. Randolph Gordon, MD, is a director at Deloitte Consulting LLP in McLean, Virginia. He is the former Commissioner of Health for the Commonwealth of Virginia.

This publication contains general information only and is based on the experiences and research of Deloitte practitioners. Deloitte is not, by means of this publication, rendering business, financial, investment, or other professional advice or services. This publication is not a substitute for such professional advice or services, nor should it be used as a basis for any decision or action that may affect your business. Before making any decision or taking any action that may affect your business, you should consult a qualified professional advisor. Deloitte, its affiliates, and related entities shall not be responsible for any loss sustained by any person who relies on this publication.