Doctors Prescribing Half as Many Opioids as They Used to, Study Finds

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Over the last decade, deaths from opioid overdoses have increased dramatically. In fact, in 2017, more than 47,000 Americans died of the opioid-related overdose. This major public health concern is now considered an epidemic, and various solutions are being tested and implemented in order to control the situation.

One of the biggest factors that contributed to the spread of this epidemic was the number of prescriptions being written by doctors to treat pain. Overdose deaths related to prescription medications increased five times from 1999 to 2017.

But the good news is that the recent efforts to address these prescriptions seem to be paying off. A new study published in the New England Journal of Medicine focused on opioid prescribing patterns and how it shifted over time. The study found that doctors are beginning to limit the number of opioids that they dispense.

In the study, researchers found that new prescriptions for opioids dropped by about half from 2012 to 2017. The researchers were led by Wenjia Zhu, a fellow in the department of health care policy at Harvard Medical

School, as well as Nicole Maestas, an associate professor in the same department.

The team studied national claims data from Blue Cross-Blue Shield from more than 86 million people to monitor prescriptions for opioids. The researchers then calculated the monthly incidence of new opioid prescriptions as the percentage of enrollees getting a prescription for an opioid who had never received such a prescription, and also those who had not received one in the previous six months.

The monthly incidence of opioid prescriptions dropped by 54 percent during the study period. The number of doctors prescribing opioids for the first time to patients also declined, same with doctors prescribing opioids to people who had not had them prescribed in the last six months. Click the link to see Phoenix's top rehab placement programs.

However, Maestas and her team also found that physicians who continued to prescribe opioids were more likely to prescribe them for longer periods and at higher doses than the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) guidelines currently recommend.

?On the one hand, we are very much encouraged,? says Maestas. ?The study does suggest that every month, fewer people are being started on opioids, which means the risk of developing opioid addiction and other adverse outcomes is lower because of that. Our enthusiasm is a bit tempered, however. One group of providers didn?t seem to get the message.?

The reason that the research team chose the time period between 2012 and 2017 for the study is that in 2016 when the opioid epidemic was already affecting the country, the CDC issued revised guidelines designed to address the crisis. The CDC advised doctors that opioids should not be the first drugs used to treat most cases of pain. They also advised doctors on how to prescribe the drugs in ways that may help reduce the risk of addiction.

For patients who were being prescribed opioids for the first time, the CDC recommends starting with a three-day supply and at the lowest dose. However, the study found that 57 percent of the doctors who are still prescribing opioids were prescribing them for longer than three days and at higher doses to first-time users.

Because the research team focused on first-time prescriptions, they managed to uncover areas where the recent efforts to control opioid abuse are falling short. For example, programs that monitor prescriptions by doctors are mostly centered at hospitals. Maestas found that many of the physicians still prescribing opioids outside of the CDC guidelines were primary care doctors in private practice.

?We?re looking at the beginning of the road and saying, ?Let?s stop that person who just had surgery from having a bottle of leftover pills sitting in the medicine cabinet,?? she says.

Maestas adds: ?We have been [too] light on opioid control policies for a long time. It?s good news that some providers are changing their behavior, but not all providers are. The data suggest that some could use additional education around this issue.?

If someone in the family is struggling with opioid addiction, it is important to seek help. A combination of medical detox and behavioral therapy can go a long way in the fight against drug abuse. But because every individual is affected by addiction differently, a comprehensive program tailored to their specific needs is necessary. Look for a nearby addiction treatment facility today and find out how drug treatment programs work.

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