Buprenorphine as Treatment for Opioid Addiction Gains Popularity in California

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Buprenorphine, effective treatment for opioid addiction, is steadily growing in popularity among California doctors as regulatory changes, physician training, and other initiatives make the medication more widely accessible.

From the end of 2014 to the third quarter of 2018, the rate of Medi-Cal enrollees who received buprenorphine nearly quadrupled according to data released by Medi-Cal, the state?s Medicaid program.

The rate for methadone was almost unchanged from the end of 2014 through the last quarter of 2017, despite the fact that it is an older and more commonly used drug.

Buprenorphine and methadone are both opioids. Both of them combat opioid addiction by reducing cravings for heroin and other more dangerous opioids. At the same time, these medications can help minimize withdrawal symptoms.

The difference is that buprenorphine is less potent compared to methadone, and is, therefore, less likely to

cause an accidental overdose. California doctors have more flexibility in prescribing it than with methadone or Naltrexone, another medication used to treat addiction.

Buprenorphine was first approved for treating opioid dependency by the US Food and Drug Administration in 2002. It was only in 2015 that Medi-Cal removed a rule requiring doctors to get prior authorization for each patient. This requirement was an additional barrier for many physicians who wanted to prescribe the drug because first, they had to obtain a federal waiver to treat patients with it. Even this process requires eight hours of training.

Nowadays, the waiver is still required. But since 2017, the state?s California Medication Assisted Treatment (MAT) Expansion Project has helped train doctors who wish to obtain it. Once physicians have the waiver, they can prescribe buprenorphine in a range of settings, including primary care offices, community hospitals, and correctional facilities.

On the other hand, methadone can only be dispensed in federally accredited opioid treatment programs.

There is a bill that was recently introduced in Congress that would eliminate the federal waiver requirement for buprenorphine, which would make it even more convenient for doctors who need it for their patients. This introduces much-needed flexibility into addiction treatment programs.

California?s MAT expansion program also funds TV and radio ads that are currently airing around the state, encouraging people with opioid addiction to seek medication-assisted treatment. The program sponsors a website, choosemat.org, which directs people to treatment.

?When you can get someone on [MAT], the evidence is that it works really well,? said Brian Hurley, director of addiction medicine for the Los Angeles County Department of Health Services. ?But getting started is the biggest barrier.?

The MAT expansion initiative is not only making buprenorphine more popular as a viable addiction treatment medication, but it is also helping addicted individuals with no insurance go through recovery. The initiative launched with two federal grants totaling $264 million, helping to cover even those with private insurance that won?t pay for the treatment.

Expansion of methadone programs is currently underway, according to the chief of Substance Use Disorder Compliance Division at California?s Department of Health Care Services, Marlies Perez. She expects to see the rate of Medi-Cal methadone claims rise, just like buprenorphine did.

Right now the opioid epidemic is killing thousands of Americans each year. But with treatment options and

medications becoming more and more accessible, it is now becoming easier for health care providers to save lives. Click the link to see San Jose's top rehab placement programs.

If someone in the family is struggling with opioid or alcohol 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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