

Taking Precautions to Make Prescriptions Safe Again

All too often, drug addiction starts in the medicine cabinet. Roger Thompson, MD, a board-certified family physician with Family Practice of Middletown noticed the devastating trend of prescription drug abuse, so he decided to do something revolutionary about it.

“We’ve been cracking down,” says Thompson, who has received Patient Centered Medical Home recognition from the National Committee for Quality Assurance. “We noticed there seemed to be an increasing number of people coming to us looking for controlled substance medications.” Long before the New Jersey Prescription Monitoring Program (NJMP) helped physicians see what medications other doctors were prescribing their patients, Dr. Thompson implemented an innovative protocol in his Middletown office to keep patients safe.

In order to obtain controlled substances such as opioids, tranquilizers, or sleeping pills, Dr. Thompson’s patients must agree to a detailed controlled substance agreement that includes



random drug testing and requires the disclosure of all prescribed medications. They also understand that all controlled substance prescriptions will only be given in writing and must be picked up at the office. At the beginning of each day, the nurse on duty in Dr. Thompson’s office draws three letters at random from a pile. Any patient who comes in to pick up a

prescription that day with a last name that begins with one of those letters must take a urine test. The sample is then analyzed for any controlled substances, including the prescribed medication.

If a patient’s initial sample is clean or subsequent samples show only the prescribed medication, the patient is given the prescription. But if the patient tests positive for other substances not prescribed or not disclosed, the prescription will not be provided and Dr. Thompson discusses the results with the patient before they leave the office. Additionally, should a patient’s urine sample reveal that he or she has not been taking their medication but is requesting a refill, this too will be addressed by Dr. Thompson.

“We’re happy to talk to people,” he says. “Sometimes I’ll come in and they’ll say, ‘I expected to be positive.’ We don’t throw them out, but we will no longer prescribe any controlled substance. We also offer to get them treatment for their problem.”

Dr. Thompson studied similar programs around the country to develop his protocol. “One of the local high schools had asked me to help them do research to implement a drug testing program they would use to allow the kids to get parking spaces,” says Dr. Thompson, who is also a full-attending physician at Riverview Medical Center in Red Bank and on the staff at Bayshore Hospital in Holmdel. “With the school, it was about 10 percent of the student population. Then we researched military protocol. They want 200 percent of their subjects tested. We didn’t need that kind of scrutiny for our office. We chose something in between. And we’re tweaking as we go,” he added. “We’re always reevaluating.”

“Our patients gave us a little pushback at first but now, when prescription drug abuse is in the news all the time, very few disagree,” he says. “We don’t profile. We don’t say, ‘You’re 22 years old, you have to get tested.’ If you’re 82 years old and you’re randomly selected, you’re taking a test. Most patients are happy to do it, because they want to make the community healthier.”

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Dr. Thompson's office pays for the drug tests out of pocket, so while he does charge patients \$15 for the test, he says most understand the need for the program, which has been in place for more than two years, and don't have a problem paying the fee.

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Feedback from patients is generally positive, Dr. Thompson reports – and especially satisfying when the program makes a clear difference.

"We had a time when three 40-year-old women tested positive for cocaine," Dr. Thompson remembers. "These were women who took their kids to school, who served on the PTA. One of the women got into therapy, came back and thanked us; she said it saved her life."

Family Practice of Middletown recently added a behavioral therapist on staff to speak to patients who need help. Dr. Thompson says he is always looking for extra ways to protect his patients.

"We do double copies of any controlled substance prescription," he says. "We have an exact copy of the prescription we wrote. If someone is taking something to the pharmacy and forged it, it's easy to tell, and easy to check." Also, at the Family Practice of Middletown, only physicians can call in prescriptions to a pharmacy. "If the pharmacy gets a call from someone who is not a doctor, they know it's not legitimate," he says.

Dr. Thompson has also reduced the number of pills in subscriptions, to cut down on overuse and drug sharing. "If patients have a small supply and it's not an open pipeline, they tend to take care of them and use them when they need them," he says. "We're trying to treat the whole person – to get people to deal with issues, instead of relying on pills." ▲



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