

PRESS-REGISTER

Getting a handle on drugs

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ALABAMA DOCTORS and pharmacists are beginning to make use of the state's new Prescription Drug Monitoring Program database, and that's good news.

By enlisting it, health care providers can better ensure that people who need high-powered prescription drugs can get them, while at the same time weeding out addicts and criminals who are "gaming the system" to obtain drugs illegally.

The Alabama Legislature approved creating the database three years ago, and state health officials -- with a grant from the federal government -- got it up and running last year.

Doctors and pharmacists are not required to use the service, but it's an option if they become suspicious that a patient is "doctor hopping" from one physician to another, whether to obtain drugs for personal misuse or to sell.

Indeed, doctors and other providers have checked the database more than 30,000 times since it became functional, according to a report this week in The Birmingham News.

The system tracks prescriptions for such painkillers as OxyContin and Lortab as well as for the anti-anxiety drugs Xanax and Valium.

Some patient advocates had feared that the system might interfere with patients' ability to obtain needed medicines, and also that it could violate patients' privacy rights. But the enabling legislation addressed those concerns by making it a crime to illegally obtain or misuse information from the database.

Meanwhile, according to the News, pharmacists say the system is easy to use and their customers understand the importance of having such information available to healthcare professionals.

In recent years, Alabama has joined the list of states contending with illegal sales and use of prescription painkillers -- in particular, OxyContin. While OxyContin is a godsend for cancer patients suffering from chronic and debilitating pain, when abused it causes a "high" that can lead to respiratory suppression and death.

The database can expose people who misuse such drugs, while encouraging doctors to prescribe and pharmacists to dispense them responsibly.

Now it's up to even more healthcare providers to make use of this valuable tool.

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