

Less is More - Writing Prescriptions a Safer Way

The Monterey County Prescribe Safe Initiative is an organization that wants to help physicians with safe prescribing. Each month, we review the overdoses and county coroner deaths that are felt to be attributed to prescription medication misuse or overuse. These, of course, are unintended consequences of good intentions.

We want to keep our patients safe and we want to help our colleagues with tactics for safer prescribing. We have ideas that we believe can work for you and your practice.

Many physicians frequently write for large numbers of habit forming and dangerous medications. Commonly we do this for logistical reasons, such as wanting to avoid the hassle of a patient needing a refill when the office is closed. But, don't do it!

What are some solutions to this problem? Here are some tried and true methods.

1. Schedule III-V medications (Benzodiazepines, Tramadol, and Tylenol #3):

Write for a small number of medications, with refills.

You can write for up to 5 refills of medications in schedule III-V, allowing for you to provide a few days, or even up to a week of medication, with several refills.

For example, after routine surgery, you could write for 21 Tylenol #3, with 2 refills. Note "one-week supply, do not fill early" on the prescription. Using this technique, if the patient is using more pills than you are recommending, you will find out about this when the patient tries to fill the prescription early. A medication problem is identified, and now you can manage this patient in a thoughtful way. You might then even consider writing that patient for a "three-day supply, do not fill early" as a medication issue has already been identified.

2. Schedule II medications

As you know, these medications present more of a challenge. Refills cannot be phoned in, and each refill must be provided in the form of a new written prescription.

However, you can provide the patient with multiple prescriptions for the same medication, each for a quantity that will last the patient for a short period of time, from one day to one week. Write the first prescription as you normally would but for the limited time period. Write the second prescription, and write "Do not fill until XX/XX/XXXX."

You can give the patient multiple prescriptions in this way at the same time. Your office staff can pre-print these prescriptions to help you save time in this process. **You are only required to provide an original signature and date on each prescription.**

For some patients it may work better if they come to the office to pick up each prescription on the designated date, which you have pre-dated and written in advance. These can all be prepped so a patient should never "run out of medication" on a weekend.

Here is an example of a prescription written in this way

Rx PATIENTS NAME Jerry Garcia AGE 8-1-42
ADDRESS _____ WT. _____
PHONE NO. _____ DATE 8/11/17

Effexor XR 75mg #30
TPO QD
* Please fill on 9/1/17

REFILL 3 TIMES Robert Weir, MD M.D.
PHONE NO. 831-555-1212
ITEM #52921

One issue that may come up with using multiple prescriptions or multiple refills, as suggested above, is that the patient may have to pay a co-pay with each pickup, rather than a single co-pay with one large script. With generic medications in small quantities, however, the cost to the patient is not likely to be significant, and with some insurance companies patients may not have a co-pay at all.

There are many unintended consequences of patients receiving prescriptions for more medication than they need or can safely manage – here are a few:

1. Each month in Monterey County, several patients die from unintended prescription medication overdoses. Many of these people have received very large quantities of Schedule II-V medications.
2. Unused medications in the home are a source of exposure to opioids for others, particularly young people.
3. Many patients really can't help themselves and take more medication than needed. For some patients it's "one taste, one dose, and off to the races they go!"
4. Medication disposal is an issue. Unused medication still frequently is flushed down the toilet or thrown away in the trash, leading to contamination of our water sources, crops, and seafood.

Thank you for your time and attention and to your dedication to the safety of Monterey County,



Monterey County Prescribe Safe Initiative