

Popular opioid painkiller falls from top ranks of prescribed drugs in Erie County

By Sandra Tan | Published 12:14 p.m. October 4, 2017 |

The tide appears to be turning against prescribing opioid drugs.

Hydrocodone-acetaminophen – a powerful, narcotic painkiller combined with Tylenol – was the most prescribed medication in Erie County for nearly a decade, according to Medicaid data. Local doctors routinely prescribed the drug at a rate of 70,000 to 80,000 prescriptions a year.

Last year marked a watershed moment, with hydrocodone-acetaminophen dropping to third place in the prescription rankings. And so far this year, the drug's ranking has dropped even further – to fifth place.

"The trend is telling me we are fighting the battle against opioid abuse, and we are clearly having success, but I wouldn't declare victory yet," said Erie County Medicaid Inspector General Michael R. Szukala.

With more than 250,000 residents throughout Erie County receiving Medicaid benefits, the Medicaid prescribing data is considered fairly reflective of larger drug prescribing trends countywide. More than 3 million Medicaid prescriptions were written in Erie County last year, and 1.3 million so far this year.

County Executive Mark Poloncarz called the latest data in the county's annual Medicaid analysis report "promising," a sign that local and state efforts to fight opioid abuse are taking effect. So far this year, the county's Department of Health has 256 confirmed or suspected opioid-related deaths.

The combination drug hydrocodone-acetaminophen had been listed as the most-prescribed drug for Medicaid recipients from 2008 to 2015, the earliest year for which the county has electronically tracked the information.

The common, anti-inflammatory painkiller ibuprofen has claimed the top spot both this year and last. Available over the counter, ibuprofen in higher doses requires a prescription.

Atorvastatin calcium, an anti-cholesterol medication sold under the brand name Lipitor, is now the second-most prescribed Medicaid drug, followed by omeprazole, an acid reflux and ulcer medication sold under the brand name Prilosec. Lisinopril, used to treat blood pressure, ranks fourth.

The reduction in hydrocodone-acetaminophen prescriptions may be the result of multiple efforts to curb opioid abuse. Last June, Gov. Andrew Cuomo signed legislation that initially limits physicians from prescribing more than a seven-day supply of opioid drugs. The legislation also mandates physician training on addiction and pain management.

In addition to greater physician awareness and training promoted locally and nationally, the state has continued programs like I-STOP, a prescription-monitoring program enacted in 2013 to halt doctor shopping for opioid prescriptions.

As doctors search for less addictive alternatives to addressing severe, chronic pain, it appears more physicians are turning to gabapentin, sold under the brand Neurontin. This drug used to treat epileptic seizures and pain related to nerve damage. In 2014, gabapentin ranked 12th among prescribed Medicaid drugs. But this year, it has moved up to ninth place.

While considered much safer and non-addictive than potent opioid drugs like hydrocodone, it can also be prone to misuse and abuse. Nationally, more health care professionals and pharmacists have begun expressing concern about increased gabapentin prescriptions.

"I fear gabapentin is the next battle on the horizon," Szukala said.

The local Medicaid report is covered by insurance and hospital representatives, Poloncarz said.

"We're one of the few counties that do this type of report," he said.

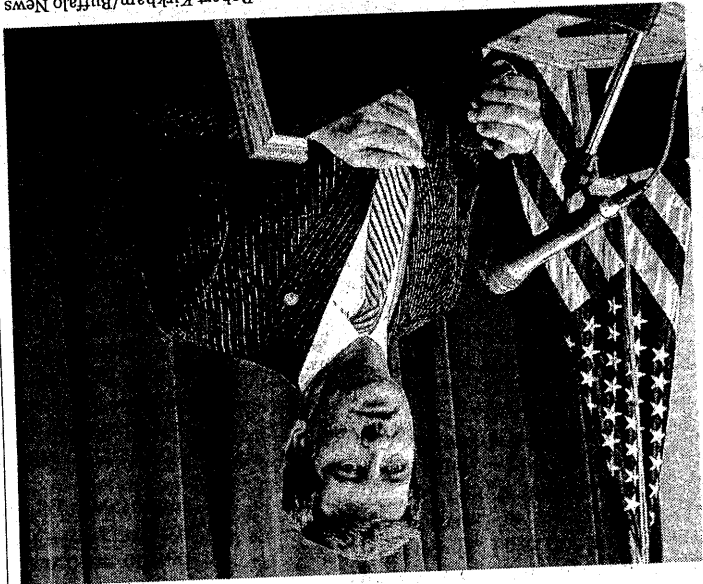
Poloncarz troubled that whites use Medicaid more than other groups

MEDICAID • from A1

residents - 282,844 people - receive Medicaid benefits, according to the report. That percentage is stable from 2015 to 2016, though the actual number of Medicaid recipients dropped by about 3,000 last year.

Medicaid is a government-sponsored health care program for poor and low-income residents. A family of four earning \$32,718 would qualify for Medicaid.

Whites comprise the largest single group of Medicaid recipients by race at nearly half, a fact Poloncarz and Erie County Medicaid Inspector General Michael Szukala said is not broadly understood by the public.



Robert Kirkham/Bufallo News

“There seems to be an impression for people that minorities make up the bulk of the public assistance,” Szukala said. “And I can tell you, on Medicaid, that’s not true.”

Blacks comprise 29 percent of recipients, followed by 9 percent for Hispanics. Though more whites receive Medicaid benefits than other races combined, black and Hispanic recipients comprise a greater portion of Medicaid recipients compared with their proportion of the county population, in keeping with broader poverty demographics.

2017 Medicaid data report for Erie County

to an improving economy and the fact that residents interested and eligible for Medicaid under the Affordable Care Act in 2013 have already done so. Given the trend, Szukala said he no longer predicts that a full third of Erie County residents will be on Medicaid by 2021.

Poloncarz said he was troubled to see that whites make far more use of Medicaid benefits than all other racial groups. He speculated whites may have greater access to transportation and therefore greater access to specialized care, but said he’d love to hear from experts.

As for the overall number of county residents on Medicaid, Szukala attributed the decline

But the tapering of local Medicaid recipients has not led to a smaller bill for New York State, which has the second-highest Medicaid enrollment rate in the nation at one-third of all residents, according to PolitiFact. Last year’s Medicaid bill for Erie County stood at nearly \$1.89 billion. That compares with \$1.78 billion two years ago and \$1.2 billion in 2008, the earliest year for which the county has data.

Poloncarz said he was troubled to see that whites make far more use of Medicaid benefits than all other racial groups. He speculated whites may have greater access to transportation and therefore greater access to specialized care, but said he’d love to hear from experts.

As for the overall number of county residents on Medicaid, Szukala attributed the decline

electronically tracked the data. Erie County is responsible for paying only a fraction of the direct cost of Medicaid. In 2016, Erie County paid 11 percent of the total Medicaid bill, \$205.5 million. This year, the county is expected to pay \$203.8 million. “The county’s portion is capped, but ultimately as taxpayers, we are paying for this,” Szukala said. “I think \$2 billion is an indicator of how many problems there are in the health care delivery system in the United States.”

Medicaid recipients are spread throughout Erie County, though the greatest concentrations of recipients remain in poorer communities in the cities of Buffalo, Lackawanna and Tonawanda, as well as parts of the towns of Cheektowaga, Tonawanda, Amherst, West Seneca and Hamburg.

Thursday
October 12
2017/8PM
Kleinhaus
Music Hall

Order BABEL suite
www.justbuffalo.com

