Drugs to treat depression are most prescribed

Erie County Medicaid data called reflective of trends communitywide

By Sandra Tan
NEWS STAFF REPORTER

The most prescribed class of drugs for Medicaid patients in Erie County doesn't treat asthma, heart disease, diabetes or even severe pain.

It treats depression.

Nearly one of every 10 prescriptions filled last year was for either antidepressants or prescription stimulants, according to a new report from the Erie County Medicaid Inspector General's Office.

And the number is growing. Stimulants are often prescribed to treat both acute cases of depression and attention deficit disorder.

"I was not surprised," said Erie County Mental Health Commissioner Michael Ranney of the findings. "Depression is one of the leading health conditions people may have and often struggle with. But we also have to remember it's treatable."

Medicaid drug data is one of the few publicly available sources of information that can highlight prescribing trends. With more than 250,000 low-income 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 more than 2 million through September of this year.

Health advocates are increasingly succeeding in destigmatizing behavioral health issues and educating primary care physicians on the importance of screening for mental health conditions as well as physical ones, Ranney said. So more people are getting properly diagnosed for conditions like depression and anxiety.

Doctors are now more likely to consider whether physical complaints like sleep issues or eating problems have roots in a mental health condition like depression, Ranney said.

"Think of how the mind and body work together," he said. "One in five people in the U.S. have a mental health condition. It's pretty common."

Antidepressants weren't always a prescription pad pacesetter.

In 2010, narcotic painkillers were the No. 1 prescribed group of therapy drugs, and the painkiller hydrocodone-acetaminophen remained the single-most prescribed drug among Medicaid patients through 2015. But tougher prescribing laws and greater awareness among physicians about the highly addictive properties of opioid drugs have led to a decline in these numbers.

The opposite is true for depression-related medication. This group of therapy drugs has seen a 91 percent increase since 2010 and been the most prescribed class of therapy drugs for Medicaid patients since 2011, based on data provided to The Buffalo

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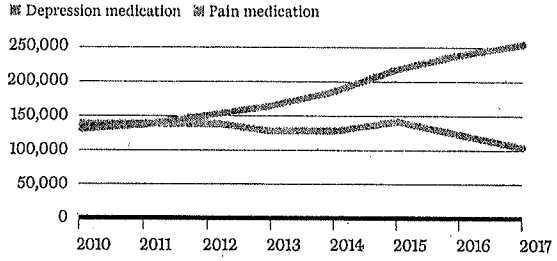
Antidepressants outpace painkillers as top prescribed drug

Medicaid prescriptions for depression continue to rise in Erie County as painkiller prescriptions fall.



Note: Depression medication includes antidepressants and psychostimulants. Painkillers includes analgesics and narcotics.

Source: Erie County Office of Medicaid Inspector General

Anti-seizure, asthma meds were ranked second, third

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News. Doctors signed more than 247,000 antidepressant and psychostimulant prescriptions for Erie County Medicaid patients last year alone.

Medicaid Inspector General Michael Szukala said this year was the first year he could sort prescription drugs by therapy class, not just by individual drug name. That analysis showed that antidepressants/stimulants were, by far, the most prescribed class of drugs. Anti-seizure medication, which can also be used to treat pain, came in a distant second, followed by asthma medication.

One reason why antidepressants may be so frequently prescribed is that patients diagnosed with depression often take antidepressants for months or even years at a time. For instance, while far more Erie County Medicaid patients were prescribed antibiotics than antidepressants last year, the number of antidepressant prescriptions filled was at least five times greater.

Ranney said he hopes awareness and treatment of mental health conditions continue to grow. The county has worked with Buffalo Public Schools and Say Yes Buffalo to establish nearly 60 mental health clinics in the city school system and is working to open a few more. It's also supporting an anti-stigma campaign regarding mental health called Let's Stigma, which includes a website wit sources and social media presence the hashtag #LetsTalkStigma and ter handle @TalkStigma.

"We can still do better as it relat primary care and behavioral health said.

The analysis of drug prescriptior Medicaid patients is only one of mul findings outlined in the new repoi Erie County Medicaid data.

Among the findings:

As doctors search for less addi alternatives to addressing severe chronic pain, more physicians are ing to gabapentin, sold under the b Neurontin. This anti-seizure drug is used to address pain related to r damage. In 2014, gabapentin ranked among prescribed Medicaid drugs. year, through September, it has m up to sixth place. While considered and non-addictive, gabapentin can be prone to misuse and abuse.

Hydrocodone-acetaminophen, a bination of opioid painkiller and nol, has fallen from the single most scribed drug in 2015 to the seventh prescribed drug in 2017. Medicaid cl prescribed this medication tend t middle-aged, white, single and fer Narcotic painkillers, as a drug class, dropped from fourth place to 11th over that same time period.