

Wisconsin Association of Health Plans: Community-based health plans working to reduce opioid abuse, addiction

Posted on Thursday, Mar 30, 2017

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(Madison) – Members of the Wisconsin Association of Health Plans have jointly committed to combating opioid abuse and addiction in Wisconsin. While individual member health plans have already implemented strategies to address the opioid epidemic in the state, effective April 1, Wisconsin’s community-based health plans are collaborating on new initiatives.

“Wisconsin’s community-based health plans are committed to helping address opioid abuse and addiction in their communities,” said Nancy Wenzel, Chief Executive Officer of the Wisconsin Association of Health Plans. “Association members appreciate and support the work of Representative John Nygren (R – Marinette), Lt. Governor Rebecca Kleefisch and the Governor’s Task Force on Opioid Abuse. Problems like opioid abuse and addiction require effort from everyone. Wisconsin can count on local, Wisconsin-based health plans to be a part of the solution.”

Association members have jointly made a commitment, beginning April 1, to:

- Support the Wisconsin Association of Health Plans Opioid Initiative Statement of Principles for addressing the opioid abuse and addiction problem in Wisconsin (see attached). The unifying Principles cover prevention and treatment and form the basis for sharing information, best practices and

evidence-based strategies.

- Track morphine equivalent dose and first-time user trends for their individual and employer group members, including state employees, and Medicaid populations, generating comparative data to enrich provider education and management of prescription drug formularies and coverage policies.
- Work with their provider partners to support strategies to reduce and control the level of opioid prescribing.
- Work collectively by sharing methodologies, best practices and evidence-based strategies to improve the quality of pain management and opioid prescribing.
- Ensure that every member suffering from opioid abuse has access to medically-appropriate treatment options.

Most Association members have already begun collecting and reviewing their opioid prescribing and use data. Members with opioid-related strategies in place have seen some reduction in opioid prescribing and use trends in recent years. The strategies include reviewing prescribing patterns with providers, identifying alternative therapies for pain control and educating members on the dangers of seeking pain medications through multiple providers. Some health plans have also implemented multidisciplinary pain management work groups to coordinate services, ensuring that patient needs are addressed while guarding against overuse of opioids.

“From the unique perspective of a health plan, we are able to see prescribing patterns and trends and act on them,” said Julia Wright, M.D., Interim - Chief Medical Officer, Dean Health Plan. “The strategies we’ve had in place—and continue to enhance—are making a real, positive difference in the lives of our members.”

Wisconsin’s community-based health plans are in a strong position to influence opioid prescribing in the state. Association members are continually among the highest quality health plans in the state, according to standardized rankings and ratings, and all have their roots in Wisconsin communities, many as part of integrated health care organizations. The health plans are uniquely skilled and able to translate health care data into policies and actions that curb overprescribing and promote quality care and treatment.

“We recognize that optimal patient care is a ‘team sport,’ and opioid prescribing is no different,” said Mark Huth, M.D., CEO of Group Health Cooperative of South Central Wisconsin. “Our multidisciplinary approach allows us to establish and follow best practices based on the latest evidence, so that our patients receive effective,

safe treatment plans. Sharing best practices, across health plans and health systems, is key in addressing the opioid epidemic.”

“We’re working in every way we can to help providers offer safe, effective options for pain control and at the same time reduce the effects of this epidemic on our patients,” said Security Health Plan Pharmacy Services Director Sue Wilhelm. “Because opioid abuse often begins with a valid prescription, we have implemented a number of ways to help providers monitor their patients’ opioid use. Tracking opioid prescribing trends provides a broader perspective that can further define our health plan policies and strategies.”

The Wisconsin Association of Health Plans is the voice of 12 community-based health plans that provide health care coverage in every county of the state to individuals, employers and government programs.