Feeling No Pain: Balance Pain Relief with Safety When Prescribing Opioids

Patients have a right to pain management. However, when opioids (i.e., narcotic analgesics) are used incorrectly, they can cause respiratory depression or arrest.

Opioids are among the top drug categories associated with adverse drug events in hospitalized patients; it’s no surprise that the Joint Commission issued a Sentinel Event Alert last year to highlight the importance of their safe use.

Organization leadership must confirm that the safe use of opioids within the hospital has been thoroughly addressed through such strategies as reviewing events for areas of concern in the medication use process, identifying system-based solutions, and implementing a variety of interventions at various levels.

Most of the opioid-related adverse events reported to ECRI Institute PSO occurred or were identified in the administration stage. Many of these were wrong-dose errors—for example, administering too much of the medication or misplacing a decimal point when programming an infusion pump. Other wrong dose errors involved fentanyl patches; frequently, the old patch was not removed before the new patch was applied.

Other common errors seen by ECRI Institute PSO involve the wrong route of opioid administration and the wrong drug administered. In many of the wrong-drug errors, confusion regarding the “immediate release” and “controlled release” formulations of the drug was a factor.

Strategies to reduce errors involving opioids are similar to those adopted for other high-alert medications. Available medications and doses should be standardized, floor stock should be limited, access to opioids should be restricted to the pharmacy, look-alike and sound-alike drugs should be differentiated clearly, and an independent double check should occur before administration.

Ensure that staff members recognize signs of respiratory depression, are aware of the possibility of oversedation, recognize signs of opioid toxicity, and know how to respond appropriately.

Through a thorough review of events and implementation of strategies across the organization, leadership can ensure the safe use of opioids and minimize the risk of unsafe practices.

Contact us, and let us demonstrate how we can help you.

How Can We Help You?

Whether you have questions about the final rule or want to learn more about ECRI Institute PSO and/or support for other PSOs, we would be happy to hear from you. Please contact ECRI Institute at pso@ecri.org or call (610) 825-6000, ext. 5558.