Coming Up Short: Coping with Medication Shortages

Just because a medication is in short supply doesn’t mean quality patient care must be too. Medication shortages require fast action in order to successfully cope. All medical staff members must know what drugs are in short supply, when they will return to regular distribution, what alternative or substitute medications exist, the alternate drug’s application, existing preparations, contraindications, error potential, and additional guidelines to ensure patient safety.

Therefore, successful communication strategies are key in managing medication shortages. A shortage task force that includes medical staff and pharmacy leadership could notify staff of imminent shortages, watch for the resolution of current shortages, and identify and assess available alternative medications. Such determinations should be disseminated among staff as promptly as possible and kept up-to-date within the organization’s electronic ordering, records, and medication administration systems.

However, such policy and protocol decisions should not wait until there is a shortage—rather, they can and should be created when the facility is not under duress. Resources, such as the U.S. Food and Drug Administration’s medication shortages website, should be identified and consulted regularly.

Alternative medications present additional risks to be considered and mitigated. For example, if single-use vials of a certain medication are all that are available, the organization must ensure their safe use to reduce the risk of infection to patients.

If it is a critical medication that is in short supply, the stakes are even higher.

Successful shortage management requires ensuring the continuity of care for patients. Therefore, organization leadership, risk management, and shortage task force members should consider the following actions:

► Identify the shortage, its implications for the organization, and its estimated duration.

► Assess the inventory of the medication on hand and determine how to prioritize its dispensation.

► Disseminate information to staff about the shortage, alternative medications, and when alternatives should be used. Ensure that alternative medications are properly programmed into medication systems, including order sets.

► Do NOT stockpile. It strains inventory capabilities, risks wasting unused medications, and artificially inflates demand on a medication that is already in short supply.

Shortages can be managed, but not only is a clear plan of action required—it must be communicated to staff members.

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.