

THE INCREASED USE OF METHADONE IN THE UNITED STATES

The media spotlight has recently turned its attention toward deaths from methadone abuse. MSNBC published an article on October 1st reporting trends of increased methadone prescribing and overdose deaths in recent years. The article explains that the rise in fatalities from methadone is higher than other narcotics, and the number of deaths due to the drug jumped sevenfold between 1999 and 2006. To engage a human interest component, the author recounts the story of Tim Zigler, a high school student who died of an overdose in 2007 at the young age of seventeen. Visit msnbc.com at the reference below (1) to read the article.

Methadone is an opioid medication used for the treatment of moderate to severe pain and narcotic addiction treatment. The disparity between the duration of pain relief and the time the drug stays in the body is complex and potentially dangerous. Pain relief from one dose of methadone typically lasts 4 to 8 hours; however, the drug may stay in the body for 8 to 59 hours. Prescribing too much methadone too fast allows the drug to build up to dangerous levels in the body which may result in life-threatening cardiac and respiratory changes and deaths. Even normal doses of methadone may result in drug build-up and subsequent life-threatening side effects.

In spite of potentially fatal outcomes, beginning in the 1990s, prescribing of methadone increased due to physicians seeking alternatives to OxyContin[®] and Vicodin[®]. At that time, the diversion and abuse of OxyContin[®] and Vicodin[®] was increasing. Also, treatment with methadone was favorable because it was less costly and could be dosed less often than other opioids. The Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) reports that from 2001 to 2006, the distribution of methadone to pharmacies, hospitals, and practitioners increased. The growth is indicative of increased utilization of methadone to manage pain. This latest escalation is likely in response to the negative publicity regarding the high potential for addiction and abuse with OxyContin[®].

With the growth in methadone prescribing, there has also been a rise in deaths associated with the drug. Deaths due to methadone overdose increased 390% between 1999 and 2004. Subsequent data indicates that fatalities continued to rise in 2005 and 2006. A 2004 Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) report indicates that most methadone deaths can be attributed to accumulation of the drug to toxic levels during initial treatment of pain, misuse of diverted methadone, and increased effects of methadone in combination with other central nervous system depressants such as alcohol.

On a more positive note, some small improvements were made in the last 2 years. In January 2008, a voluntary restriction was placed on 40 milligram methadone wafers, restricting their distribution to narcotic treatment programs and hospitals. This restriction was implemented in response to the rise in deaths due to methadone overdosing. The DEA concluded in a September 2009 meeting that this restriction has had a positive impact on decreasing overdoses and deaths.

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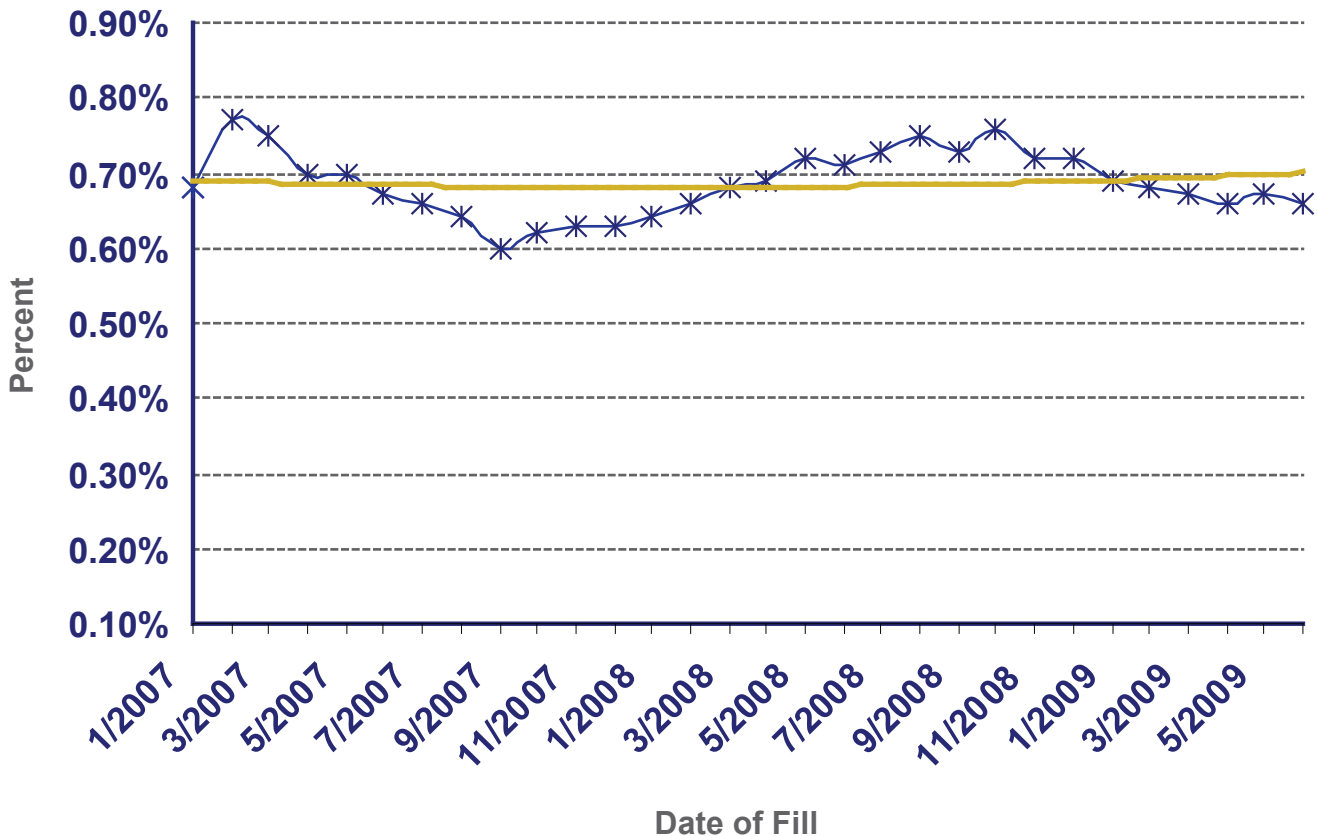


First Script Business Data Analysis

First Script is a growing company and has gained many new business clients over the past few years. For that reason, analyzing the percentage of methadone prescriptions to total prescriptions filled allows us to understand the methadone utilization within our population.

The data demonstrates a fairly consistent level of methadone use when compared to total prescriptions filled. While it appears that methadone use has spiked for the general population, the First Script worker's compensation population has not experienced that same increase. The reason for the consistent methadone utilization is possibly due to claimants not being financially responsible for co-pays in workers' compensation and drugs like OxyContin being the pain medication preferred by some claimants. In addition, state rules may prevent prescribers from altering treatment plans for injured workers.

% Methadone Prescriptions Per Total First Script Claims



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The highest utilization volume is in the most populous states; however these states did not necessarily see the greatest percent increases in use over the past 2 years. For instance, Maryland, Pennsylvania, and Virginia, while in the top 10 states for utilization, showed a percent increase of less than 28% since 2007. Additionally, Arizona, Hawaii, and Mississippi, all with less than 45 prescriptions filled for the first half of 2009, all experienced greater than a 330% increase in use over the past 3 years. While the percent increases may be due in part to increased claim volume in those states, claims examiners in these states should be aware of the fast utilization increases and the drug's potential abuse problems.

What can be done to monitor methadone use?

To help claims examiners manage injured workers using methadone, First Script offers fsAlert and fsOutreach. fsAlert is a utilization management tool that sends an alert to the claims examiner and/or case manager retrospectively when a prescription is filled that meets criteria. For example, a prescription of methadone with a dosage greater than six tablets per day will generate a message. fsOutreach is a program developed to notify physicians when prescribing is outside guidelines or prescribing information.

Methadone is made available by numerous manufacturers and marketed under various names in tablet, wafer tablet and oral liquid forms.

The DEA forecasts that physicians will continue to prescribe methadone because it is inexpensive, has a longer duration of action, and is effective. However, physicians will likely become more educated regarding methadone prescribing which will in turn decrease methadone overdoses in the future. Heightened regulations and changes in recommended dosing may come from the FDA should the media continue to bring the issue into public light.

References:

1. <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/33109569/ns/health-addictions>
2. <http://www.usdoj.gov/dea/pubs/pressrel/pr092409.html>
3. <http://online.factsandcomparisons.com/MonoDisp.aspx?monoID=fandc-hcp11321&quick=Methadone+HCl&search=Methadone+HCl&disease>
4. <http://www.usdoj.gov/ndic/pubs25/25930/25930p.pdf>

First Script is a product of Coventry Workers' Comp Services, and offers not only an extensive pharmacy network, but also a fully integrated first fill and mail order program to provide complete control of pharmacy services through out the life of a claim. First Script also goes beyond traditional durable medical equipment programs to offer a national network of local providers for all types of workers' compensation claimant products and services.



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