Morrison County care teams and lawmakers partner to prevent prescription drug abuse

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Nationally and in Minnesota, the number of deaths caused by drug overdoses are on the rise. Minnesota’s overdose deaths increased by 11 percent between 2014 and 2015, with more than half of these deaths being related to prescription drugs, according to the Minnesota Department of Health.

Morrison County saw this trend playing out in their community. In 2014, the top emergency room diagnosis at CHI St. Gabriel’s Health in Little Falls was therapeutic drug monitoring—a diagnosis assigned to those seeking additional pain medications in the ER. With help and funding from Minnesota’s State Innovation Model (SIM) grant, the Morrison County ACH initiative formed in February, 2015. This ACH successfully created strong patient-centered partnerships between CHI St. Gabriel’s Health and South Country Health Alliance (the insurance plan for Medicaid patients in Morrison County), as well as a wide range of community partners, including local pharmacies, law enforcement, long-term care, schools, county social services and public health, and the county attorney’s office.

By the end of 2015, less than one year after the formation of the Morrison County Community Based Care Coordination ACH initiative, therapeutic drug monitoring fell below the top 20 emergency room diagnoses at CHI St. Gabriel’s Health.

A Personal Success Story

As of June, 2016, the Morrison County Community Based Care Coordination ACH had served approximately 387 people in the Little Falls area. One of these patients,
“Andrea” (not her real name to protect her privacy) was referred to the Controlled Substance Care Team by an OB/GYN provider. At her OB/GYN appointment, Andrea described intense pain, and requested a prescription for pain medication. After reviewing Andrea’s patient history, this provider noticed that 12 different prescribers and four different pharmacies had distributed pain medication to Andrea over the past year. Additionally, from August 1, 2015 through November 30, 2015, Andrea had been seen in the emergency room on eight separate occasions.

On December 10, 2015, the Controlled Substance Care Team began working with Andrea. Over the course of six appointments and follow-up contacts, they learned that Andrea suffered from severe anxiety, and would often feel so ill and overwhelmed at work that she would go to the emergency department. Some of the time, the doctors in the emergency department would prescribe her pain medication.

After another visit to the ER in January, 2016, the Controlled Substance Care Team formulated a comprehensive care plan to address Andrea’s anxiety, and recommended weekly appointments with her primary care physician. Both Andrea and her physician agreed to the plan. The weekly appointments provided Andrea with a sense of security in knowing that her health concerns would be proactively addressed, and since creating the plan, no further emergency department visits occurred through the reporting period.

The Controlled Substance Care Team also learned that Andrea was under financial stress and had a child experiencing developmental delays. The Controlled Substance Care Team worked with local partners to connect Andrea to financial supports in the county, and to enroll her child in a county social services program to address his health needs. By putting Andrea at the center of her health care and assessing her as a whole person, the Controlled Substance Care Team was able to address some of Andrea’s stressors and the root causes of her anxiety.

### Community Collaboration

In addition to caring for patients who currently use prescription opioids, the Morrison County Community Based Care Coordination ACH initiative has also taken steps to reduce the overuse of prescription pain killers within the community. Each month, the Morrison County Prescription Drug Task Force meets to discuss potential strategies for combating unnecessary drug use and abuse. This interdisciplinary task force is comprised of hospital staff, law enforcement personnel, (both from the police department and the sheriff’s department), military officials, ER physicians, the county attorney, clinic staff and Morrison County Public Health staff.

In 2015 the task force enlisted the assistance of state legislators to draft new legislation that would require all pharmacists to create and maintain an account with the Minnesota Prescription Monitoring Program (PMP). This program allows prescribers to access patient prescription histories and helps pharmacies detect diversion, abuse and misuse of prescriptions for controlled substances. Opioid users become very aware of which pharmacies do not check the PMP and often request to fill their prescriptions through those pharmacies. This allows patients to obtain early and additional drug refills, increasing the chances for further abuse. By mandating that all pharmacies in Minnesota register with the PMP, and encouraging its use, this community-wide coalition is helping to limit narcotics abuse across the state.

### Comprehensive Community Care

As stated by Minnesota Commissioner of Health, Ed Ehlinger, in order to slow down the drug overdose epidemic in America “we must redouble our efforts and implement a comprehensive public health approach involving communities, health care providers and law enforcement to increase prevention efforts and access to chemical dependency treatments, pain management and emergency interventions.” The collaborative community care model established in Morrison County is an innovative example of a comprehensive public health approach, a significant accomplishment, and an important step toward combatting the opioid overdose epidemic in the U.S.