MYTHS & MISCONCEPTIONS: PATIENTS WHO OBTAIN MULTIPLE PRESCRIPTIONS

Q. I have been notified by a local pharmacy that a patient of mine has been filling prescriptions for the same medication from multiple physicians, not just from me. I feel betrayed and angry. I also think this activity should be reported to the authorities but to whom do I report it?

A. It is understandable to feel betrayed and angry in this situation when it appears that the patient has taken advantage of your good will and undermined the therapeutic relationship. Despite this, your professional obligation to your patient remains. It is important to promptly address this issue clinically with your patient – either in-person or by phone.

You will need to gather additional information, reassess the patient, and possibly modify treatment recommendations. You may even need to end the treatment relationship, taking care not to abandon that patient. All of this can be accomplished best within the clinical framework of the patient-clinician relationship where you - as the clinician - do not take the patient's actions personally but recognize them as symptomatic of an underlying illness.

The questions of whether and how to report to authorities are much trickier. There is no national requirement to report this type of activity. State laws vary, but very few states either require or allow reporting by the physician – giving considerable deference to confidentiality. In most states, the burden for reporting is placed on the pharmacy and/or pharmacist. Your state medical board and local medical or psychiatric society should be good resources for determining the standards in your state. If you are told that there is a requirement to report in your state, be sure to obtain a copy of the statute, rule, or regulation for yourself.

Should the police investigate your patient, you are limited by confidentiality as to what information can be disclosed. Any request for information should be in writing and cite the requestor's authority to access the information. Questions about authority can be discussed with your personal attorney. Participants in The Psychiatrists' Program should feel free to contact the Risk Management Consultation Service (RMCS) helpline for assistance with evaluating such a request.

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