

New Walgreens Policy Regarding Filling Pain Management Opioid Prescriptions

Walgreen's appears to have developed a new policy as to filling opioid prescriptions that appears to be nationwide. They recently sent a letter to multiple pain management physicians telling them that they would no longer fill opioid prescriptions written by them. It appears to be driven by an algorithm identifying physicians writing large quantities of opioids for chronic pain. Walmart did the same thing nationwide several years ago.

The policy appears to stem from a recent multimillion dollar judgment against Walgreens for their failure to monitor opioid dispensing that contributed to the opioid "epidemic."

Physicians were given no explanation as to why they were selected, but the only common denominator appears to be those of us who write quantities larger than average for **chronic pain**. The physicians or at least myself were never contacted in person, nor was any reason given for their decision. They did not access or review any of my charts. There have been no complaints that I am aware of from patients or pharmacists and they indicated that local pharmacist had nothing to do with their decisions. I have had no notifications of any investigations by the DEA or the Louisiana State Board of Medical Examiners regarding my medical practice. As you all know, my practice in pain management is impeccable and meets all standards, so there would be no valid argument based on any safety concerns regarding how I manage my pain patients.

For those who were filling their prescription at Walgreens, CVS and other pharmacies will still be filling prescriptions from me and other pain management physicians. For those who have difficulty finding an alternative pharmacy, contact your insurance company and sign up for their mail order pharmacy account and I can send prescriptions each month to the mail order pharmacy. In fact, using the mail order pharmacy I think will be better in the long run as I would expect them to suffer less from the quantity restrictions that some pharmacies have.

For those of you who do not fill at Walgreens, this will still affect you because the influx of new patients to other pharmacies may impact their ability to maintain adequate opioid quantities to meet the needs of everyone.

Understand then, Walgreen's policy is detrimental to everybody. Let me point out that the argument that Walgreens evidently is providing is that this is their effort to reduce opioid related overdose deaths. As you all know, this is a false argument. By restricting access to appropriate pain management and pain medications, this will only increase opioid related overdose deaths. It has been shown that a large number, estimated at 61%, of the opioid related deaths from the use of illicit medications are associated with people with chronic pain seeking relief of their pain because they were unable to access appropriate medical care or medications. This is a fact. This is not just about problems with opioid addiction. It's people without addiction that are suffering and dying as well.

I point this out to emphasize the need for pain patients to do something about it. It is about time that you all stood up to this situation that is nationwide and is abominable. The DEA appears to be restricting production of opioids and distribution of opioids, placing a burden on all pain patients abilities to access appropriate management of their chronic pain. They also appear to be restricting access to pharmacies by limiting pharmacies' ability to fill prescriptions because a patient may elect to see a physician who lives more than 50 miles from the pharmacy or from where they live. This restricts patients' abilities to select their own physicians and this is unethical and immoral in itself. Patients should have a right to select physicians of their choice and not be bound by geographic limitations.

It is my belief that not only are these policies unethical and immoral and against the public interest in terms of safety, I believe it is also potentially illegal because it is discriminatory against patients with certain medical conditions requiring chronic opioids, and this type of discrimination is illegal..

Please contact pain advocacy organizations and get their help *or give them help* in fighting this. Contact the Board of Pharmacy and voice your complaints. Contact local news organizations and voice your concerns and ask them to help publicize these atrocities. Talk to attorneys if you can. I believe a class action lawsuit should be engaged. If you are socially active on the Internet, create a blog, do a YouTube channel get your voices heard. Most importantly, **contact your state representatives, both congressman and senators**. We have a senator who is a physician. Let them know that if they want your vote they better step up to the plate on this problem and that you'll be watching them to see how they manage this problem/ Emphasize they will not get your vote if they don't do something about it.

Please, **make your voice is heard** because if you do not the situation will continue to get worse. CVS will potentially fold just like Walmart did years ago and Walgreens is doing now. This is wrong and you all need to stand up to it. Please consider boycotting both Walmart and Walgreens for these behaviors. Let them know you're boycotting them for these policies. Threaten them by letting them know that you will be supporting nationwide boycotts against these companies because of these policies.

Good luck, you have my sympathy and support.

Eric Ehlenberger MD.