

Study Finds Low Compliance with Opioid Treatment Guidelines: Top [2012-10-03]

By [Bill Kidd](#), Central Bureau Chief

A report released Tuesday by the Workers Compensation Research Institute (WCRI) says that despite the increased attention on opioid misuse as a major public health concern, many physicians are not following recommended guidelines when treating injured workers.

The guidelines are intended to prevent dependence or addiction, and possible overdose deaths, but compliance with the guidelines is "relatively low" in most states, WCRI Executive Director Richard Victor said.

WCRI's 21-state study, "Longer-Term Use of Opioids," which was released Tuesday, found that overall, nearly one in 12 injured workers who started treatment using the narcotics were still using them three to six months later.

But workers in Louisiana, New York and Pennsylvania had significantly higher chances of being on opioids for an extended period, WCRI reported.

The study states were Arizona, Arkansas, California, Connecticut, Georgia, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, New Jersey, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia and Wisconsin.

The study looked at longer-term use of narcotics in the 21 states and how often recommended treatment guidelines for monitoring injured workers with longer-term use were followed by physicians.

The monitoring included use of services, such as drug testing and psychological evaluations, "which can help prevent opioid misuse by injured workers that could result in overdose deaths, addiction and diversion," WCRI said.

"However, the study found relatively low compliance with the medical treatment guidelines in most states," the institute reported. The guidelines included provisions for drug and psychological evaluation of workers using opioids for long periods.

The study is based on nearly 300,000 workers' compensation claims and 1.1 million prescriptions associated with those claims.

The claims represent injuries arising from Oct. 1, 2006, to Sept. 30, 2009, with prescriptions filled up to March 31, 2011. The data reflect an average of 24 months of experience.

Study findings include that more frequent and longer-term use of narcotics "may lead to addiction and increased disability or work loss," as shown by the number of injured workers still using narcotics three to six months after starting them.

The study found drug testing was used less frequently than recommended by medical treatment guidelines.

Among claims with longer-term use of narcotics, 18% to 30% received drug testing in most states studied, with the 21-state median at 24%.

Over the study period, the percentage of workers with longer-term use of narcotics who received at least one drug test increased from 14% to 24% in the median state.

Use of psychological evaluation and treatment services continued to be low. Only 4% to 7% of the injured workers with longer-term narcotic use received these services in the median state.

The study found injured workers in Louisiana and New York had the highest use of opioids on a long-term basis: nearly one in six in Louisiana, and one in seven in New York. In Pennsylvania, the number of workers was approximately one in nine.

In California, North Carolina, South Carolina and Texas, approximately one in 10 workers were on longer-term use. By contrast, fewer than one in 20 injured workers were identified as longer-term users in Arizona, Indiana, Iowa, New Jersey and Wisconsin.

In 10 states, the percentage of claims with longer-term use increased 1% to 3% from 2007-2008 to 2009-2011. New York and Louisiana increased by 3%.

Other study states showed little change, except for Massachusetts. In Massachusetts, the percentage of injured workers with longer-term use decreased from 11% during 2007-2008 to 7% during 2009-2011.

The results for Massachusetts might be explained by "several regulatory changes," including a mandatory education program for prescribers of controlled substances, and upgrading of the prescription drug monitoring program, WCRI suggested.

"It is uncertain whether this reversal will necessarily hold for the long term, but it is certainly worth close monitoring," the institute said.

The study said other states are taking steps to help reduce longer-term narcotics use.

"In Texas, efforts have been made within the workers' compensation community to address issues related to utilization of opioids and other prescription drugs," WCRI reported. The institute cited Texas' adoption of a closed prescription drug formulary effective Sept. 1, 2011, and noted the formulary will apply to claims with dates of injury before that date effective Sept. 1, 2013.

A Texas Department of Insurance study shows fewer opioids are being prescribed following adoption of the formulary, which is "likely to have a significant impact on the longer-term use of opioids," WCRI commented.

Tennessee, New York and other states also have approved initiatives intended to improve monitoring of prescription drug use, the report said.