Rx Theft and Forgery: How It Happens and What You Can do About It

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Prescription medication abuse is rampant throughout the United States. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), 16,500 people died in 2010 from overdoses tied to common narcotic pain relievers.¹ In 2009, 15,500 people died from opioid painkiller overdoses, more than deaths from heroin and cocaine combined.² According to the CDC, approximately 1.4 million ED visits in 2011 were a result of pharmaceuticals misuse and/or abuse.³

Who is stealing prescription drugs?

Pharmacists, pharmacy techs, nurses, receptionists, doctors, patients, and even police officers have been caught stealing or forging prescriptions, stealing prescription pads, or stealing prescription medications. It can happen anywhere, by anyone.

How does this affect you?

Prescription theft or forgery by an employee in your practice may have legal and ethical ramifications for all professionals employed by the practice. If the practice fails to take proper precautions to prevent these actions, an injured person may attempt to sue for negligence. If you have a medical practitioner practicing medicine under the influence of narcotics, there are myriad negative ramifications affecting patient care, patient safety, or staff safety. You may also discover recordkeeping errors or inaccurate medical records.

A healthcare provider also may encounter issues with the federal Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) if there is suspected drug diversion going on in the practice. A DEA investigation could result in suspension or even revocation of a healthcare provider’s DEA license.

Prescription theft and/or forgery could lead to loss in business, unhappy staff, increased medical errors, increased malpractice exposure, and more challenging defenses of potential malpractice claims.

What can you do?

Electronically prescribing medications can help limit the availability of paper prescription pads in your office. Electronic prescriptions also may have the added benefit of preventing pharmacy staff from making alterations to the prescription.

One of the best ways to prevent prescription pad theft is to keep them under lock and key. Only trained healthcare providers with prescription-writing authority should have access to prescription pads. It is also a good idea to avoid pre-signing prescription pads.

In addition, most states have an electronic drug monitoring program aimed to combat prescription drug abuse. These programs track prescriptions given to each patient. Some states allow practitioners to request a patient’s prescription data to help determine whether the patient may be abusing prescription drugs. If you have a patient displaying possible drug-seeking behavior, you may want to consider
obtaining data from your state’s electronic program to help determine if there is an issue. Be sure to check your state’s laws regarding access to this information; you may need to submit a formal request. Some states will not dispense this information to healthcare providers.

Maintaining accurate medication lists and limiting refills are also good ways to help determine whether a patient is abusing prescription medications. You may want to consider using NCR (no carbon required) prescription pads so your practice has accurate records of exactly what was prescribed and to whom.

Being proactive about the process of prescribing controlled substance will help limit your practice’s susceptibility to prescription theft and/or forgery.

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