

Generic Vicodin Was a Top Medicare Drug in 2013, Data Shows



Hydrocodone acetaminophen was prescribed by about 691,000 providers in 2013. *Photo: TOBY TALBOT/ASSOCIATED PRESS*

By

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Generic Vicodin's ranking as the drug most widely prescribed to Medicare beneficiaries in 2013 illustrates how comfortable doctors have become reaching for this powerful painkiller for primary care, despite its potential for abuse.

An analysis of data released last week on Medicare's prescription-drug program found that more than half of the prescriptions for the drug, known generically as hydrocodone acetaminophen, came from family-practice or internal-medicine physicians. Those two

specialties represented just under a quarter of the more than one million providers in the data.

Researchers said the findings reflect the years-long increase in the use of opioid painkillers in the U.S., which comes in tandem with concerns about abuse. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, nearly two million Americans either abused or were dependent on opioids in 2013. “It’s striking that the drug prescribed to the most beneficiaries is a narcotic painkiller that can be addictive,” said Walid Gellad, an associate professor at the University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine.

About 691,000 providers prescribed the painkiller in 2013, including surgeons, dentists and pain experts. That compared with roughly 555,000 who prescribed the No. 2 drug, an antibiotic. Overall, more than eight million Medicare beneficiaries were prescribed the painkiller.

The data reflect prescriptions to Medicare beneficiaries under the program’s Part D benefit, which covers medications they get from pharmacies, not those administered in hospitals or doctors’ offices. Many of those who took hydrocodone acetaminophen were in the program because they were disabled, even if they weren’t 65 or older. Among providers who wrote more than 10 hydrocodone acetaminophen prescriptions to both elderly and disabled beneficiaries, about 45% of the claims were for people under 65.

Michael Pendleton, an internal-medicine doctor in Corpus Christi, Texas, who was one of the top 50 prescribers by total cost of the drug, said it provides “the perfect combination for alleviating pain and improving function,” and he uses it for patients with chronic pain and those suffering from acute pain due to injuries. He said he takes time to assess whether patients are really in pain, and is careful to watch for signs of addiction: “There’s a huge amount of thought that goes into who deserves what at what time.”

The Medicare data highlights how some prescribers turn to the drug far more than others—even within the same specialty. Among family practitioners, the bulk of providers wrote hydrocodone acetaminophen prescriptions for less than 20% of their Medicare patients. However, a group of about 200 providers gave the drug to more than half the beneficiaries to whom they prescribed.

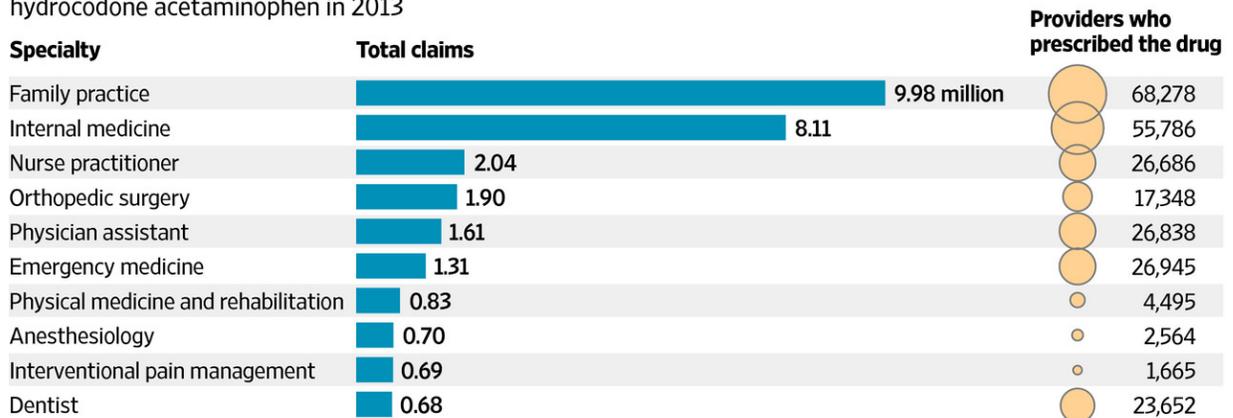
Rates of use also vary significantly by geography, the Medicare data shows, with hydrocodone acetaminophen representing more than 4% of all prescriptions in Alabama, Oklahoma and Michigan, but less than 1% in states including New Jersey and Massachusetts.

While the wide range of prescription rates can reflect differences in practice makeup, experts said, it can also flag potential excessive use or fraud. “It raises the question as to whether those doctors are overprescribing,” said Michael Steinman, associate professor at the University of California, San Francisco.

Dorothy Gillespie, an internist in Hattiesburg, Miss., was the 26th-ranked prescriber of hydrocodone acetaminophen in 2013 by dollar value, with \$106,875 in spending on the drug for 335 beneficiaries. She surrendered her medical license in March, after being accused of violating state prescribing laws. Dr. Gillespie had been warned repeatedly against prescribing controlled substances in the absence of medical need and prescribing to known drug abusers, according to state medical-board filings.

Strong Medicine

Top 10 specialties among Medicare Part D providers prescribing the generic painkiller hydrocodone acetaminophen in 2013



Note: Data includes providers with more than 10 claims.

Source: Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services

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Dr. Gillespie said she was surprised she was among the top prescribers “because there are a lot of doctors who prescribe more than I do.” She said she hadn’t fought the state medical-board proceeding, instead choosing to retire.

Many among the doctors who prescribed the most hydrocodone acetaminophen said they had good reason for their use of it. Laxmaiah Manchikanti and his partner Yogesh Malla were the ninth and 10th top prescribers of the drug by cost. Dr. Manchikanti said the Medicare figures also reflect prescriptions by nurse practitioners at their pain clinics in Paducah, Ky., and Marion, Ill.

Dr. Manchikanti said nearly all of his painkiller patients were referred to his practice after they were already dependent on an opioid prescribed by a primary-care doctor. He typically reduces their doses. He likes to use hydrocodone acetaminophen, which has been on the market in the U.S. for decades, because it is relatively inexpensive, and he believes it is less addictive than many other painkillers. “We are very familiar with it,” he said.

Scott Keffer, an Ansted, W.Va., doctor who provides medical care for patients at nursing homes and rehabilitation facilities, said physicians have been taught to pay greater

attention to patient pain, but also to be on guard against painkiller abuse. “Physicians are being pulled in two different directions at all times,” he says. He had a relatively high rate of prescriptions for hydrocodone acetaminophen per Part D patient in 2013—12 versus an average of 2.5 among most doctors prescribing the drug.

Brian Powderly, of Parkersburg, W.Va., had one of the highest ratios of claims per beneficiary for the painkiller—14 versus an average of 2.5 among most doctors prescribing the drug—during 2013. There were 3,313 claims for hydrocodone acetaminophen for 235 beneficiaries under Dr. Powderly’s care in 2013.

Dr. Powderly said the high rate was driven by his practice, which focuses on providing medical care for about 500 nursing-home residents. “They’re all institutionalized and have multiple chronic illnesses,” he said. “It is considered substandard medical care to leave pain untreated in a long-term medical facility.”

He orders the drug to relieve pain caused by arthritis, cancer and other conditions, if acetaminophen alone isn’t sufficient. He said another class of pain drugs known as nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs, or NSAIDs, isn’t a good option for elderly patients because they can cause gastrointestinal bleeding.

Experts also said it was likely that hydrocodone acetaminophen use has declined more recently, amid growing attention to the risks of powerful painkillers and a regulatory change in August that put more restrictions on prescribing.

Data from [IMS Health](#) shows that hydrocodone acetaminophen was the second-most-prescribed drug in the U.S. last year, as it had been for several previous years, but the number of prescriptions fell by 8% in 2014 from 2013.

Among the makers of hydrocodone acetaminophen are [Mallinckrodt PLC](#), [Endo International PLC](#) and [Sun Pharmaceutical Industries Ltd.](#) A Mallinckrodt spokeswoman

said hydrocodone acetaminophen was the most prescribed generic medication overall in 2013, so “it is logical that Medicare Part D data would mirror that finding.” Spokesmen for Endo and Sun didn’t respond to requests for comment.

Most Prescribed

Costly brand-name drugs top the list of what Medicare pays for in its Part D prescription program, while pain, cholesterol and high blood pressure are among the leading ailments targeted, in 2013.

All costs incurred for top 10 drugs in billions

Nexium	Heartburn	\$2.53
Advair Diskus	Asthma	2.26
Crestor	Cholesterol	2.22
Abilify	Antipsychotic	2.11
Cymbalta	Antidepressant	1.96
Spiriva	Asthma	1.96
Namenda	Dementia	1.56
Januvia	Diabetes	1.46
Lantus Solostar	Diabetes	1.37
Revlimid	Cancer	1.35

Source: Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services

Top 10 drugs by Medicare enrollees in millions of people

Hydrocodone-Acetaminophen	Pain	8.09
Simvastatin	Cholesterol	7.03
Lisinopril	Blood pressure	7.01
Omeprazole	Heartburn	6.38
Amlodipine Besylate	Blood pressure	6.24
Levothyroxine Sodium	Thyroid	5.74
Atorvastatin Calcium	Cholesterol	5.35
Azithromycin	Antibiotic	5.29
Furosemide	Diuretic	5.00
Ciprofloxacin HCL	Antibiotic	4.78

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— [Peter Loftus](#), Rob Barry and Jonathan D. Rockoff contributed to this article.

<http://www.wsj.com/articles/generic-vicodin-was-a-top-medicare-drug-in-2013-data-shows-1430697811>