
Pain Management Update

We have been experiencing challenges in getting post-operative patients pain medications to take during their recovery from knee procedures. This is a direct result of the attempts to combat the narcotic crisis in the United States. Pharmacies and insurance companies are taking over the authorities of physicians to prescribe narcotic medications to their patients, making post-operative recovery more uncomfortable than it needs to be. While we support efforts to decrease the number of patients taking opioid medications (hydrocodone or Vicodin, oxycodone or Percocet and tramadol or Ultram), there is often a need for these pain medications after surgery. This is especially true after knee surgery which can be quite painful for the patient.

A confounding problem we see is that some patients cannot tolerate certain pain medications due to unpleasant side effects, such as nausea, vomiting, itching rash or confusion and mental changes. Some patients also have different metabolic pathways that affect how much pain medication they require to obtain pain relief. We therefore need flexibility to use various medications and dosages to help patients' recovery from the surgical procedures we are doing to improve their quality of life.

The government, pharmacy and insurance companies have developed their own "guidelines" for prescribing pain medications, seemingly without recognizing the problems identified above. This has taken the prescriptive authority from the treating physician and given it to the pharmacist. We are seeing pharmacists deny prescriptions that have been legally written, and the number of pills allowed being curtailed to less than the dosages recommended by the drug manufacturers and FDA in the written guidelines for drug usage. Prior to surgery, it is important that you call your insurance company to understand their rules and call your pharmacist to discuss your post-operative pain medication allowances.

While these developments are concerning, it is the patient who is suffering from inadequate medication relief. We want all of our patients to know that we are working hard on developing new pain management strategies to reduce the use of narcotic medications and help patients recover from their surgical procedure. We have a number of alternatives that we are trying and pathways to try and customize the pain management for different patients depending on their needs.

If you have problems with your post-operative recovery due to pain management issues, please feel free to contact your insurance company, the pharmacy company or the state Board of Health to let them know your concern.