

CLINICAL COMMENTARY

Three Step Approach to Patients Seeking Stimulant Medications at a Primary Care Physician's Office

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Abstract

Stimulants remain the pharmacotherapy of choice for adults with Attention Deficit / Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD).¹ Stimulants also have a significant potential for misuse. Precautions should be taken to avoid medication misuse amongst primary care physicians and other providers.

Key points

- Untreated ADHD can be a significant cause of distress in patients' lives with academic, occupational, and social consequences.
- Stimulant Medications have a high potential for misuse.
- Precautions at a primary care doctor's office may reduce the misuse frequency of this class of medications.

Clinical scenario

A 25-year-old man presents to establish care after moving to Los Angeles from Wisconsin to pursue a career in acting. He graduated from the University of Wisconsin with a bachelor's degree in communications. He reported taking dextroamphetamine/amphetamine (Adderall) since his sophomore year in college after friends recommended he get tested for ADHD. He would like you, as the primary care provider, to prescribe him Adderall Immediate Release 10mg BID prn. He states he uses this medication twice a day nearly every day.

Commentary

The safe transfer of care from one provider to another is a skill ubiquitous to the practice of medicine. However, the transfer and prescription of stimulant medications is a unique and difficult issue, and a problem providers are facing more frequently.

Estimates of the prevalence of ADHD in the United States range widely by state, but as a whole, the USA has a reported prevalence between 4-4.4%.^{2,3} Often the variance in prevalence is due to difficulty in establishing a diagnosis. The disorder is a continuation of childhood ADHD rather than a discrete adult disorder. According to the DSM V, "Several

inattentive or hyperactive-impulsive symptoms were present prior to age 12 years."⁴ Thus, ADHD is a widely prevalent disorder that is difficult to diagnose.

Furthermore, stimulant medications improve productivity significantly and are highly sought after—especially by students and young professionals.⁵ The proper treatment of ADHD is quite important as the disease untreated may lead to significant morbidity. In fact, many studies even report that "stimulant medication is more likely to reduce the risk of substance abuse in ADHD than enhance it."^{6,7}

This common tutelage on the care of ADHD is exemplified by Timothy Willens, M.D., from Massachusetts General Hospital who spoke at the annual meeting of the American Psychiatric Association in 2005. He quotes multiple studies, which purport that stimulant prescriptions prevent substance abuse: "One study with five-year follow-up showed that the risk for substance abuse in untreated patients was 75%, compared with 25% in treated patients—a rate not significantly different from that in the general population. A meta-analysis of seven studies with a total of about 1,000 patients demonstrated that at four-year follow-up there was a two-fold higher risk of developing substance abuse in untreated versus treated ADHD patients."^{5,6}

This teaching oftentimes compels physicians to prescribe stimulant medications, which has undoubtedly led to the unfortunate problem of over-prescribing. It is no wonder then that we have seen a consistent increase in the incidence of abuse in stimulant medications from the late 1990s until now. Dr. Setlik from Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center actually thinks that "adolescent abuse of prescription stimulant attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder medications increased far more rapidly than general and adolescent substance abuse for the years of 1998-2005."⁸ A more recent review from 2015 also revealed: "The misuse of stimulant medication among college students is a prevalent and growing problem... random-effects meta-analysis found that the rate of stimulant medication misuse among college students was estimated at 17 % (95 % CI [0.13, 0.23], $p < .001$). A qualitative review of the literature also revealed that Greek organization membership, academic performance, and other substance use were associated with stimulant misuse."⁹

The most common source for obtaining stimulant medications is from peers with prescriptions,⁹ and this has not been to the betterment of those patients because “nonmedical prescription stimulant use is associated, on average, with lower academic performance.”¹⁰

To summarize, a physician has to balance the appropriate prescription of stimulants to patients with ADHD against the growing number of patients that are misusing these prescriptions. Some practitioners resort to calling pharmacies, signing medication contracts, random drug screenings, etc. One strategy described in the *Journal of General Internal Medicine* emphasized the importance of “care team cohesion” and using a “provider network” to detect and prevent adverse events.¹¹

Along these lines, this author puts forward a plan for the safe transfer of prescriptions of controlled substances from one provider to another.

- 1) Communicate with the previous prescriber.
 - a. Often this can be accomplished by requesting that patients obtain a letter from the previous prescriber. The correspondence must include the name of the drug, the dose, the quantity prescribed per month, and also must notify the physician with any concerns regarding misuse.
 - b. In some instances, one may also request documentation of the initial diagnosis of adult onset ADHD.
- 2) Utilize medication tracking systems (such as CURES in the state of California) to ensure patients are not getting prescriptions from multiple providers.
- 3) Contract with patients that early refills will be not be prescribed and that prescriptions will only be obtained at scheduled appointments with a single provider.

In conclusion, stimulant medications are a necessary and effective tool in the management of ADHD, but simple measures can be taken to prevent their misuse. Clear communication between providers and patients and accurate documentation are essential tools in the proper transitions of care that happen so frequently in the practice of medicine. This is especially important in the prescription of stimulant medications.

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