HHS Announces New Plans to Combat the U.S. Opioid Epidemic

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U.S. Health and Human Services (HHS) Secretary Sylvia M. Burwell recently announced a major expansion to the government's official plan to combat the nation's opioid epidemic. New actions include expanding access to buprenorphine, a medication used to treat heroin and prescription painkiller addiction; ending financial incentives for doctors who prescribe opioids; and launching more than a dozen new studies on drug abuse and chronic pain.

The actions build on the 2015 HHS Opioid Initiative as well as the federal government's National Pain Strategy, which aims to reduce the burden of chronic pain across the country.

One major expansion included in the announcement is a new rule finalized by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) that will allow doctors to prescribe buprenorphine for up to 275 patients a year. Previously, practitioners were capped at 100 patients.

The new plans also aim to eliminate questions on hospital surveys that link the number of pain management prescriptions to Medicare payments to hospitals, with HHS experts arguing that many clinicians report feeling pressured by such surveys to overprescribe opioid drugs. The HHS will also now require Indian Health Service clinicians and pharmacists to check a nationwide database of opioid users prior to prescribing that an opioid be taken for more than seven days. Both changes aim to help end the nationwide overprescribing of painkillers that has driven the epidemic thus far.

In addition, research on opioids conducted and funded by the HHS will help the department better track and understand the U.S. addiction crisis, support the development of new chronic pain treatments and reduce drug misuse and overdose across the country. More than a dozen studies overviewed in a new HHS inventory report will examine different aspects of opioid addiction and pain treatment over the next year.

However, Secretary Burwell noted that in order for these plans to be enacted, Congress would need to approve President Obama's $1.1 billion budget request to help fight the opioid epidemic. Both the House and the Senate are slated to negotiate opioid legislation this week, but a recent GOP-drafted compromise on the request does not include the additional funding.

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