



Report warns of overprescription for children on Medicaid



Prescription drugs. (AP Photo/Darron Cummings, file)



By Laura Nahmias 3:37 p.m. | Mar. 26, 2015

ALBANY—Children in five states, including New York, who are on Medicaid are being prescribed antipsychotic drugs for too long at too young an age, a [new report](#) has found.

Second generation antipsychotics “are widely used to treat children enrolled in Medicaid who have mental health conditions,” according to the report by the federal Department of Health and Human Services’ Office of the Inspector General. But those drugs have been “previously found to cause serious side effects and little clinical research has been conducted on the treatment of children with these drugs.”

The report, which reviewed Medicaid claims for a sampling of hundreds of children from New York, California, Florida, Illinois and Texas from 2011, identified “quality of care concerns” in

67 percent of the claims for antipsychotic drugs prescribed to children.

The reviewers found multiple problems.

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Roughly 17 percent of the claims were for children too young to take the drugs and in 41 percent of claims, the drugs prescribed were the wrong treatment, the report found. Reviewers also found that in 53 percent of the claims, childrens' use of the drugs was poorly monitored, 34 percent of the children were taking the drugs for too long, and 37 percent of the claims showed children were mixing too many different kinds of drugs.

Federal attention on the issue of possible overprescription of controlled substances for children on Medicaid,

including both antipsychotics and stimulants, has intensified in recent years.

A 2011 federal report found children in foster care were nine times more likely to be prescribed psychotropic drugs than other children. And as [Capital reported late last year](#), a New York State health department drug utilization review showed thousands of New York children on Medicaid were being prescribed the powerful stimulants Ritalin and Adderall even though they'd never been diagnosed with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder.

New York children on Medicaid were also far more likely to be medicated for ADHD than other children, according to the state's review.

Child welfare advocates have expressed concern that such drugs, whose long-term effects on children are not yet known, are being overprescribed in the absence of mental health care providers who could provide behavioral therapy.

In one case study included in the inspector general's report, reviewers found a 4-year-old who had been diagnosed with both Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder and a mood disorder

was taking four different drugs, including two antipsychotics, without medical supervision, but was too young to be treated with such drugs.

“There was no evidence in the child’s medical records of any monitoring while the child was taking the sampled SGA (second-generation-antipsychotic)” the report said.

Using just medication to treat the child’s various diagnoses was also the wrong treatment, the report said.

“This child was placed in the custody of child protective services at 4 weeks old and had a history of abuse and neglect and severe psychosocial issues, such as aggression, anxiety, and mood swings,” the report said. “The reviewer stated that individual, family and behavior therapy should have been attempted before initiating treatment with drugs. However, there was no evidence in the child’s medical record indicating that such therapies were attempted.”

In another case, a 16-year-old diagnosed with bipolar disorder and ADHD was prescribed double the maximum recommended dosage of an antipsychotic to treat bipolar disorder.

Another 16-year-old whose case was highlighted in the report was being prescribed six different psychotropic drugs at the same time for a vague diagnosis of “hallucinations,” resulting in severe side effects.

“This child experienced paranoia, hostility, unstable mood, hallucinations, and suicidal thoughts. This child also experienced significant side effects potentially resulting from the prescribed drugs, including a 22-pound weight gain, insomnia, and edema (swelling) of hands and feet,” the report said.

Reviewers also found that only 8 percent of the claims filed for anti-psychotic drugs for children were for the limited number of medically accepted reasons the drugs are used to treat. But the study found 92 percent of claims filed were for drugs prescribed for non-medically accepted conditions, including bipolar disorder, mood disorders and autism spectrum disorders.

New York was the only state covered by the review which has a policy declaring it will only pay claims for anti-psychotics prescribed for medically accepted conditions. But the federal review showed “at least 3,366 claims totaling \$773,607 were paid in violation of this policy. New York State Medicaid staff told us that because of the lack of diagnosis information on drug claims,

this coverage policy is difficult to enforce without conducting a medical record review,” the report said.

The inspector general's office recommended that all states work with the federal Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services to examine drug use among children in state Medicaid programs.

Read the full report here: <http://1.usa.gov/1GuTas3>

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