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Doctors in training gain access to prescription database

By Felice J. Freyer Globe Staff December 14, 2015

Doctors in training will soon be able to access the state's database that keeps track of prescriptions for powerful drugs, after the health department last week closed a loophole seen as hindering the fight against opioid abuse.

The database, known as the Prescription Monitoring Program, lists every prescription for controlled substances filled in Massachusetts.

It is considered a key tool in preventing opioid abuse because it reveals when a patient is obtaining drugs from multiple prescribers or pharmacies, which is a sign of overuse or diversion.

But the 6,400 doctors who have limited licenses because they are in medical residency training [cannot access the database](#), even though they can prescribe controlled substances.

That is about to change. Last week, the state Department of Public Health instituted a process so that hospitals can enroll residents in the Prescription Monitoring Program. The residents will be able to log on to the database under the authority of a fully licensed representative of the training program.

"It think it's great," said Dr. Jon Santiago, a first-year resident in emergency medicine at Boston Medical Center. "I see patients all the time asking for opiates. . . . Residents by and large are some of the biggest opiate prescribers in the larger hospitals in Boston."

Santiago is a member of the Committee of Interns and Residents, a union that petitioned Governor Charlie Baker to change the rules so residents could consult the prescription database.

They explained that it is often too difficult and time-consuming for residents to locate an attending physician who can search the database.

Equally important, Santiago said, residents are learning habits they will carry into their future practices.

"If we get into the habit of checking the PMP as residents," he said, "when we're . . . in practice on our own, we'll be comfortable checking it. . . . We'll be better prepared to prescribe."

The Department of Public Health sent letters to hospital administrators Thursday with information about the new enrollment process, saying it would take about 72 hours to process residents' applications for access.

"Improving the PMP has been a top priority of DPH and the Baker-Polito administration," health department spokeswoman Rhonda Mann said in a prepared statement.

“Over the past several weeks, we have worked closely with the Office of Prescription Monitoring and Drug Control, the Massachusetts Medical Society, the **Conference of Boston Teaching Hospitals**, and the Massachusetts Hospital Association to address getting residents/interns registered as efficiently and expeditiously as possible on the current online PMP system,” Mann said.

Representative Nick Collins, a South Boston Democrat, proposed legislation that would have required the state to open the database to doctors in training. But he said he was pleased the health department acted on its own.

“This is a great victory for Massachusetts in our fight against opiate abuse, and I commend the Department of Public Health for its swift action in closing this loophole,” Collins said in a statement.

He predicted the move would “have an immediate impact on the amount of pills on the street.”