

Bill calls for requiring Maine doctors to tell patients about opioid risks

A bill pending in the Maine Legislature that has the backing of the LePage administration would require medical professionals who prescribe opioids to inform patients that the painkillers are addictive.

Rep. Deb Sanderson, R-Chelsea, the bill's sponsor, argues that patients need to understand the "harmful effects of opioids." The bill, which requires patients to sign a form stating that they have been informed of the medication's addictive properties.



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The legislation, which would cover opioid prescribers such as doctors, nurse practitioners and dentists, has bipartisan co-sponsors and is

currently before the Legislature's Committee on Health and Human Services.

Four of five new heroin users first misused prescription opioids, according to the American Society of Addiction Medicine, and drug overdose deaths have reached crisis levels in Maine over the past few years.

"Prescribers are the gatekeepers to promoting responsible use, and as such, become the most important partners in not only curbing the high rate of addiction we are experiencing but, going forward, helping to reduce the number of people who become addicted," Sanderson said in a written statement.

DOCTORS CALL BILL UNNECESSARY

Discussion of the bill comes a week after Maine Attorney General Janet Mills reported that the state had a record 376 drug overdose deaths in 2016, nearly 40 percent more than in 2015. About eight in 10 of those deaths involved opioids – heroin, fentanyl or prescription painkillers such as OxyContin.



Rep. Deb Sanderson, the bill's sponsor, says patients need to be aware of the dangers of opioids.

New guidelines from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommend only three-day prescriptions for opioids when possible, saying that the risk of opioid dependence increases substantially with even a five-day prescription.

Opioids have not been proven to be effective in treating chronic pain, according to the U.S. CDC, and more research is needed.

But Gordon Smith, executive vice president of the Maine Medical Association, which represents doctors, said the association is opposed to Sanderson's bill because it's unnecessary and would establish the precedent of the Legislature practicing medicine.

Smith said Maine already has the strictest opioid prescribing law in the country – limiting the dosage and length of opioid prescriptions and requiring use of a prescription monitoring program, among other reforms. And he said doctors are already talking to their patients about the risks of addiction.

“The precedent that would be set here is horrible,” Smith said. “We already have standards that doctors must follow and they already must inform patients about the risks associated with any medication they prescribe.”

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All the bill would do, Smith said, is add another document for patients to sign.

STATE HEALTH OFFICER LIKES IDEA

Dr. Stephen Hull, a pain management specialist at Mercy Hospital in Portland, agreed that patients should be informed about the risks of opioid addictions, but said the proposed law is unnecessary.

“Do we really want legislators practicing medicine?” Hull asked.

However, Dr. Christopher Pezzullo, the state health officer with the Maine Center for Disease Control and Prevention, said cementing informed consent for prescribing opioids into the law would ensure that doctors are having needed conversations with patients.

“Research shows that informed consent for opioid treatment can be effective for ensuring that patients understand the risks associated with opioid medications and improving communication between providers and their patients,” Pezzullo said.

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