Preventing Drug Diversion in Healthcare Organizations: Seven Key Strategies

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Perhaps now more than ever, as a result of the ongoing opioid epidemic, drug diversion in healthcare organizations is a serious concern. Drug diversion refers to “any act or deviation that removes a prescription drug from its intended path from the manufacturer to the patient.”¹ Drug diversion can have grave consequences, including substandard care delivered by impaired providers; denial of essential pain medication or therapy, causing unnecessary patient suffering; and the increased risk of viral and bacterial infections.²

Diversion can occur at various points in the supply chain and through an array of subversive techniques, making prevention and identification tricky and sometimes daunting for healthcare organizations. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), which helps investigate infectious outbreaks triggered by drug diversion, has identified vulnerabilities in healthcare organizations’ prevention and detection of drug diversion, as well as gaps in incident response. The CDC notes that, “Healthcare facilities should have strong narcotics security measures and active monitoring systems to prevent and detect diversion activities.”³

This article discusses, at a high level, seven key strategies that healthcare organizations should consider as part of drug diversion prevention initiatives, including (1) establishing policies and procedures related to drug diversion; (2) implementing medication procurement, inventory, and security standards; (3) developing detailed protocols for prescribing, dispensing, and administering medications; (4) ensuring thorough documentation; (5) providing careful monitoring and surveillance of medication inventory and processes; (6) developing protocols for investigating suspected drug diversion; and (7) educating and training personnel about drug diversion.

SEVEN KEY STRATEGIES

1. Establish policies and procedures related to drug diversion.
2. Implement medication procurement, inventory, and security standards.
3. Develop detailed protocols for prescribing, dispensing, and administering medications.
4. Ensure thorough documentation.
5. Provide careful monitoring and surveillance of medication inventory and processes.
6. Develop protocols for investigating suspected drug diversion.
7. Educate and train personnel about drug diversion.
Drug Diversion Policies and Procedures

Drug diversion can occur when healthcare providers or staff perceive slack policies and oversight for controlled substances at their healthcare organizations. To avoid this perception, organizations should establish clear and detailed policies/procedures related to medication security and drug diversion.

Organizational policies should promote a culture of safety and delineate the ethical and legal responsibility of every employee to report potential drug diversion activities. The organization should make clear that employees reporting potential drug diversion in good faith will not be subject to punitive actions or retaliation. Additionally, organizations’ medication security and drug diversion policies/procedures should explain relevant state and federal regulations associated with drug diversion, the appropriate procedures and contacts for reporting suspected drug diversion, the processes the organization will use to investigate such reports, and the possible outcomes/consequences for healthcare providers or staff members who misappropriate medications; examples of these consequences might include suspension, termination, and/or legal action.

Medication Procurement, Inventory, and Security Standards

Organizational drug diversion policies lay a broad foundation for medication safety and oversight; however, healthcare organizations also should establish specific standards for how medications — particularly controlled substances — are procured, stored, and secured. These standards should include limiting the number of people who are authorized to order medications and have access to controlled substances.

A system of checks and balances should be implemented that assigns separate accountability for ordering and receiving medications, as well as a requirement that at least two individuals validate and provide signatures/dates confirming that orders received match invoices and documentation.

Security features and safety technologies also should be employed to safeguard medications in the pharmacy and patient care areas. Examples include separating and securing controlled substances from the rest of the medication inventory; limiting the number of keys/access codes to secured areas and ensuring access is revoked for employees who resign or are terminated; restricting access to needles, syringes, prescription pads, and procurement forms; and using automated distribution machines (ADMs), barcode scanning, biometric screening, and other technologies.

Medication Prescribing, Dispensing, and Administration Protocols

The various activities associated with prescribing, dispensing, and administering medications are vulnerable to safety and security lapses. In an effort to shore up these processes from a security standpoint, healthcare organizations should develop and enforce well-defined protocols that discourage attempts at drug diversion.
For example, only providers who are licensed and authorized should be permitted to prescribe and administer controlled substances; however, policy should prohibit these providers from prescribing for themselves or family members. Authorized providers should place orders through an electronic system with controlled access, and orders should be verified prior to dispensing or administering any controlled substances.

Other safety strategies include dispensing medications in packaging that is the exact size (or as close as possible) to the dose ordered, using tamper-evident packaging, requiring that controlled substances are retrieved from storage areas as close to the time of administration as possible, ensuring that medication carts and delivery modes are secure, establishing labeling standards for syringes containing controlled substances (if the medication is not administered immediately after the syringe is filled), and enforcing policies requiring multiple providers to witness the wasting of controlled substances.6

**Documentation**

Documentation is paramount in almost every aspect of healthcare, including drug diversion prevention efforts. First and foremost, organizations should have written policies related to medication safety, security, and diversion that clearly explain staff expectations and responsibilities. Written policies should detail how to report suspected diversion, investigation processes (including information about for-cause drug testing), disciplinary actions, and staff resources for substance abuse prevention.7

Healthcare organizations also should have written procedures for logging, storing, and monitoring medications. Accurate and thorough documentation should be kept for all medications prepared and dispensed in the facility. Further, designated individuals should carefully and routinely document medication inventories, including controlled substance counts in the pharmacy and ADMs.

Documentation also is essential in any investigative activities related to drug diversion. The individuals conducting and overseeing an investigation should ensure timely and complete documentation relative to complaints, incident reporting, medication inventory discrepancies, irregular prescribing patterns, health record reviews, behavioral issues, patient outcomes, action plans, etc. The information documented should be factual and objective.8

**Monitoring and Surveillance**

Monitoring and surveillance are important efforts in preventing drug diversion, and healthcare organizations can use various techniques to identify discrepancies and abnormalities in medication processes. Using security cameras in controlled substance storage and preparation areas — as well as other areas identified as high-risk, such as the emergency department and procedural areas — can assist with surveillance efforts and discourage diversion attempts.
Other monitoring and surveillance techniques include ensuring the organization has the capability to generate and aggregate data related to controlled substance ordering, prescribing, and administration. Data reports should be created and audited on a regular basis to identify potential signs of diversion, such as discrepancies in ADM transactions versus medication administration activities; irregular trends in prescribing, administration, and ADM use in comparison to peers; and other noticeable activities related to medication inventories, cancellations, and returns.

Controlled substances and high-alert medications should be tracked as they move throughout the organization, and discrepancies should be investigated and resolved when they are discovered — but no later than the end of the shift. Issues that cannot be resolved within the specified timeframe should be elevated to the appropriate leaders/team members for further investigation.9

**Drug Diversion Investigation Protocols**

To effectively deal with issues of drug diversion when they occur, healthcare organizations need proactive investigation strategies and protocols. An initial step is establishing a multidisciplinary drug diversion response team; this team may include representatives from pharmacy, medical staff, nursing, risk management, security, administration, human resources, and other departments.10

The functions of the response team will likely include review of policies and procedures related to the organization’s drug diversion program, consultation, oversight of investigative activities, review of evidence, decision-making about outcomes and action plans, reporting responsibilities, and participation in communication and outreach planning.

Additionally, healthcare organizations should have well-developed protocols that dictate the steps for investigating alleged drug diversion. Protocols should include standardized interviewing processes, procedures related to for-cause drug testing, guidance for managing impaired employees, and required notification and reporting responsibilities within the organization and to appropriate local, state, and federal authorities.11

**Education and Training**

A well-educated and vigilant staff is a powerful resource for healthcare organizations to have in the fight against drug diversion. The facility’s drug diversion response team should receive comprehensive education about diversion prevention techniques, state and federal laws associated with drug diversion, and appropriate methods for reporting diversion.

Further, as part of orientation and ongoing training (at least annually), healthcare providers and staff (including licensed independent practitioners) should receive training about the organization’s medication safety, security, and drug diversion policies and procedures. Organizational policies should stipulate that training and education are mandatory prior to authorized staff having access to controlled substances.12
Training also should incorporate education to help providers and staff recognize warning signs and behaviors that might indicate drug diversion, such as sloppy or inadequate documentation, irregular trends in prescribing, increased complaints of patient pain by provider or by shift, practitioners volunteering to give medications for other clinicians, frequent or unexplained absences or illnesses, changes in appearance or attitude, etc. Providers and staff who are aware of red flags for drug diversion might be able to help prevent potential issues or assist with early identification.13

Another essential component of training and outreach initiatives is providing information about programs and support available to employees who might have substance abuse disorders. Examples of these services might include substance abuse hotlines, counseling services, employee assistance programs, community substance abuse programs and support, and resources from professional associations.

**Conclusion**

Any setting in which controlled substances are stored, administered, and/or prescribed is vulnerable to drug diversion attempts. In healthcare, these settings might include hospitals, clinics, medical practices, urgent care facilities, and more. Although drug diversion has long been a problem in healthcare, the growing opioid crisis has contributed to elevated concerns and a renewed urgency to take preventive actions against misappropriation of medications.

As part of prevention efforts, healthcare organizations should make concerted efforts to implement policies and procedures that aim to discourage, identify, and properly address actual or suspected incidents of drug diversion. Organizational policies and procedures should include healthcare personnel’s ethical and legal obligations to report suspected drug diversion; clearly define security standards and procedures for procuring, prescribing, dispensing, administering, and monitoring medications; provide guidance for investigative processes related to alleged incidents of diversion; and delineate robust training and educational programs relative to drug abuse and diversion.

**Endnotes**


3 Ibid.


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6 Ibid


9 Berge, K. H., et al., Diversion of drugs within health care facilities; Minnesota Hospital Association, *Road map to controlled substance diversion prevention 2.0*.


11 Berge, K. H., et al., Diversion of drugs within health care facilities; Minnesota Hospital Association, *Road map to controlled substance diversion prevention 2.0*.

12 Berge, K. H., et al., Diversion of drugs within health care facilities.

13 Minnesota Hospital Association, *Identifying potentially impaired practitioners*.

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