

A Prescription for Confusion

by Ven Griva

About half of all Americans take prescription drugs for one reason or another, yet a recent study indicates that for many of them their doctors have failed to adequately explain the reason, duration and time of their regular doses.

That was the conclusion of a study published in the Sept. 25 issue of Archives of Internal Medicine.

Some of the things doctors fail to explain is the potential side effects of pharmaceuticals and how long the patient will need to take the drug, the study found.

Taking medications properly is essential to ensuring their effectiveness. However, patients often fail to follow prescribed therapies, which can lead to worsening disease, failure of the treatment, adverse effects, drug overdose, unnecessary hospitalization and higher health care costs, the study said.

"Patients who report better general physician communication, better explanations about how to take their medications and more medication information are more adherent," the study authors wrote.

The study was performed by the University of California Los Angeles David Geffen School of Medicine. Researchers surveyed 185 patients served by 44 physicians during 1999. Researchers contacted patients by telephone one to two days before scheduled visits to two Sacramento, Calif., health care systems. The visits were audiotaped and transcribed, and physicians identified those patients to whom new drugs were prescribed.

Drugs were prescribed for a wide range of ailments, including cardiovascular disease; ear, nose and throat illness; pain relief; infection; psychiatric conditions; and pulmonary, or heart, disease.

Physicians used the specific name for the medication in 74 percent of the visits, explained the purpose for the

drug 84 percent of the time, and discussed adverse effects only 35 percent of the time. Thirty-four percent of the encounters included instructions on how long to take the drug, 55 percent on the number of doses to take and on 58 percent of the visits the timing of dosing was discussed.

"This study demonstrates spotty physician counseling about new medication," the authors, led by Dr. Derjung M. Tarn, wrote. "Although physicians educated patients more about psychiatric and analgesic medications, the overall communication was poor even for these medication types and could contribute to patient misunderstanding about how and why to take their new medications."

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