News Briefs

PTSD added to qualifying conditions for medical cannabis program

In early December, Health Commissioner Edward Ehlinger, MD, added post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) to the growing list of qualifying conditions allowed in the state’s medical cannabis program.

“This decision was made after careful deliberation of available evidence, consultation with experts in the field and public input,” Ehlinger said. “While the process of reviewing these potential additions was difficult due to the relative lack of published scientific evidence, PTSD presented the strongest case for potential benefits. PTSD also has few effective treatment alternatives available for some patients with the condition.”

“The MMA urges restraint in the use of medical cannabis as a treatment for PTSD but is cautiously optimistic that the unique research component of the state’s medical cannabis program may generate data that ultimately could lead to a better understanding of cannabis’ effectiveness,” said MMA President David Agerter, MD, in a statement to the media.

In addition to adding PTSD as a qualifying condition, Ehlinger approved the use of patches, lotions, creams, gels and ointments as application methods. Currently, patients can purchase cannabis in pill, liquid or oil form at any distribution center in the state.

MMA reacts to attorney general’s opioid prescribing recommendations

Minnesota Attorney General Lori Swanson released a comprehensive report in November containing 23 recommendations for addressing the opioid abuse crisis plaguing Minnesota. Some of the recommendations, including a call for mandatory use of the state’s Prescription Monitoring Program (PMP) and required CME for prescribers, are oft-cited ideas that have not been shown to be effective in other states.

The MMA is a strong supporter of the PMP and supported legislation in 2016 requiring all physicians to register for a PMP user account. But mandatory use for every prescription would be a cumbersome administrative requirement, particularly given the PMP’s current limitations, most notably its lack of interoperability with most electronic health record systems.

In September, the Institute for Clinical Systems Improvement (ICSI) unveiled its guidance on opioid prescribing, which addresses the entire continuum for acute, sub-acute and chronic non-cancer pain in adults. The ICSI guideline recommends querying the PMP only in certain circumstances.

The MMA has also opposed mandatory CME for prescribers as an overly blunt requirement that fails to recognize the variable educational needs among physician specialties. The state attempted CME mandates in the past and subsequently repealed the requirements.

The MMA strongly encourages physicians who treat pain and prescribe opioids to address their knowledge gaps with specific and relevant information. To support physician education, the MMA has partnered with the University of Minnesota Medical School and the Steve Rummler Hope Foundation to offer a variety of free webinars, which are available on the MMA website at www.mnmed.org/painseries.

Along with mandatory use of the PMP and required CME for prescribers, Swanson recommended a statewide standing order for naloxone, removing prior authorization requirements on

Republicans appoint chairs to influential health care committees

Sen. Jim Abeler (Anoka) will chair the Senate Human Services Reform Finance and Policy Committee. A chiropractor by training, Abeler chaired the HHS finance committee from 2011 to 2012 when he served in the House of Representatives.

The Senate Health and Human Services Finance and Policy Committee will be chaired by Sen. Michelle Benson (Ham Lake).

Sen. Julie Rosen (Vernon Center) has been named chair of the Senate Finance Committee, considered one of the more powerful positions in state government. Rosen has long been active on issues related to health care and public health.

Sen. Karin Housley (Saint Mary’s Point) will chair the Senate Aging and Long-Term Care Policy Committee.

Rep. Matt Dean (Dellwood) will continue to chair the House Health and Human Services Finance Committee.

Rep. Joe Schomacker (Luverne) will take over the House Health and Human Services Reform Committee.

Rep. Debra Kiel (Crookston) will hold the gavel in the House Subcommittee on Aging and Long-term Care, a position formerly held by Schomacker.

Republicans, however, do not align with most of the measures required by Minnesota’s State-wide Quality Reporting and Measurement System. The MMA will support efforts to better align state and federal measures and, where alignment does not exist, lobby for greater flexibility for clinics. While the MMA remains supportive of efforts to measure the quality of health care provided to patients, the existing system is needlessly burdensome and often duplicative.
buprenorphine by Medical Assistance, reducing from one year to 30 days the maximum length of time a narcotic prescription can be filled.

The Governor’s Task Force on Mental Health submitted its final report to Gov. Mark Dayton in mid-November. The report contained the following nine recommendations:

- Creating a comprehensive mental health continuum of care
- Redesigning governance of Minnesota's mental health system
- Using a cultural lens to reduce mental health disparities
- Developing a mental health workforce
- Achieving parity
- Promoting mental health and preventing mental illness
- Achieving housing stability
- Implementing short-term improvements to acute care capacity
- Implementing short-term solutions to improve crisis response.

Dayton convened the task force to advise him and the Legislature on mental health system improvements within Minnesota. The 24-member task force included two MMA members, Paul Goering, MD, and Bruce Sutor, MD, as well as representatives of patients and families, service providers, counties, courts, law enforcement, corrections, public health, education, housing and legislators.

The board approved three broad strategies to address this problem:

- Working to increase appropriate prescribing
- Supporting passage of state legislation to improve the prescription drug market, protect patients, increase accountability of pharmaceutical benefit managers and reduce administrative complexity
- Partnering with and informing stakeholders, including patients, about steps they can take to reduce prescription drug spending.

The MMA recognizes that actions taken at a state level will have a more limited impact than changes made on a national level.

**Board approves new policies on HPV vaccination, firearm safety and more**

At its November meeting, the MMA Board of Trustees approved several new policy positions on topics ranging from HPV vaccination to firearm safety.

With the board’s action, the MMA now:

- Supports legislation that would add HPV vaccination to the list of health services to which minors can consent.
- Will promote conversations between providers and patients on responsible firearm ownership and safe storage in the home (much like current conversations on the use of child-restraint systems in the car); supports the growing movement for common-sense changes to gun laws to promote responsible gun ownership and supports efforts in Minnesota to require criminal background checks on all purchases and transfers/exchanges of firearms, with reasonable exceptions for immediate family and law enforcement and military acting in an official capacity; urges elected leaders to ensure that law enforcement officials have adequate resources to enforce the laws that hold sellers accountable when they sell firearms to prohibited purchasers; and supports state investment in Minnesota’s firearm surveillance system to improve data collection, analysis and research on firearm injury prevention.
- Identifies substance use disorders as chronic conditions that are both preventable and treatable, and urges greater attention and increased resources for substance use disorder prevention, treatment and recovery services in Minnesota.
- Supports efforts to move oral contraceptives to over-the-counter (OTC) status, noting that the benefits in terms of reducing unintended pregnancy outweigh the risks of OTC access and broader use. (This position is consistent with the position of the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists.)

**Board takes action to reduce script drug spending**

The MMA Board of Trustees approved recommendations from the MMA’s MARCH (Minnesota Action to Reduce Costs in Healthcare) steering committee about ways the MMA can address the rising and unsustainable cost of prescription drugs.

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**Task force on mental health submits recommendations**

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