

# Workers' comp model could curb opioid crisis

Abuse of prescription opioids has been cited as one of the leading factors in a recent decline in the life expectancy of working-age Americans. Prescriptions for powerful painkilling drugs rose sharply in the last 20 years, an increase that coincided with more drug abuse and more deaths from drug overdoses.

Many victims of the opioid epidemic first became hooked on the drugs while recovering from work-related injuries.

Now a federal program seeks to limit addiction by controlling how much medication injured federal government employees are allowed to receive. It limits the total number of pills workers' comp recipients may receive and the length of time they can be prescribed. The new program, which could become a model for successful addiction prevention, went into effect in September.

## Limited-time prescriptions

The U.S. Department of Labor is responsible for managing the federal workforce's workers' compensation system through its Office of Workers' Compensation Programs. Its opioid-abuse prevention program seeks to reduce the risk of long-term opioid use triggered by a workplace injury.

Using guidelines from the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the OWCP policy limits initial opioid prescriptions to seven days. Going beyond the CDC guidelines, it restricts additional prescriptions to three more seven-day periods. The 28-day maximum can only be exceeded if doctors complete a detailed injured-worker evaluation that justifies more opioids.

If you manage a workers' compensation program, you may be able to adapt the OWCP's approach for your workplace. The program relies on four principles:

- Effective controls that limit the length of time workers are on opioids and how many doses they receive during that time
- Tailored treatment that assesses each injury, including whether opioids are needed at all
- Communication about opioid hazards, with specific information tailored to each worker
- Aggressive fraud detection to make sure injured workers aren't diverting opioids.

**Online resource** Learn more about the OWCP's new opioid policy at [www.dol.gov/owcp/dfec/opioidactionplan.htm](http://www.dol.gov/owcp/dfec/opioidactionplan.htm).