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Large Jail Network Bulletin

Winter 1993

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LARGE JAIL NETWORK

BULLETIN

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San Bernardino County Inmates Purchase Over-the-Counter Medicines through the Commissary

by *Maria Lawrence, R.N., B.S.N., M.P.A., Administrator of Medical Services, San Bernardino County Sheriff's Department, San Bernardino, California*

The Medical Services Division of the San Bernardino Sheriff's Department is experiencing the same problems as health services in other corrections facilities and in the community—increasing health care costs combined with dwindling resources. In corrections, we face the additional problems that result from a growing inmate population with more complex health care needs. Our crowded facilities also increase the potential for the spread of communicable disease.

In the custody setting, inmates' ability to receive virtually unlimited health care services can give them unrealistic expectations for health care after they are released. Such expectations sometimes lead to their seeking primary care "on demand" from hospital emergency rooms, which, in turn, causes an increase in community health care costs.

Because health care resources in corrections and the community at large are limited, it is both fiscally and ethically correct to undertake measures to reduce waste and to allo-

cate resources where they are most needed and can be most effective. These measures include teaching inmates to be informed, responsible, health care consumers.

These were among the issues the San Bernardino Sheriff's Department considered as we looked for ways to use health care resources more effectively. One measure we instituted was to make selected over-the-counter medications available to inmates through the commissary.

Project Goals

We had three goals in beginning this project:

- **To encourage inmates to assume more responsibility for their health.** By making over-the-counter medications available to them, we give inmates the same opportunity to medicate themselves for the common cold, flu, and other minor, self-limiting ailments as they would have in the outside community.
- **To reduce the number of inmate requests for sick call for minor health problems.** With a reduction in sick call for minor ailments for which most persons normally would not seek professional care, health care staff can be utilized

more effectively to treat those with serious needs. Staff can also play a more significant role in early detection of disease, prevention, treatment, and education.

- **To reduce pharmacy costs.** We anticipated that escalating pharmacy costs could be reduced by having some medications paid for through the commissary.

An added benefit is that when inmates share responsibility for their own care, the value of treatment is likely to increase, as is the likelihood of compliance with instructions for self-care.

Addressing Health Care Concerns

Correctional health services must address a number of issues when considering a program that makes over-the-counter medications available to inmates. The most critical issues are the medications' safety and risk for toxicity; identification of inmates who should not be permitted to purchase medications; inmate education; and procedures for instances in which self-care fails. In addition, it is crucial to ensure that medications are available to indigent inmates and that all eligible inmates have timely access to the medications.

Safety and security. Facility staff from all departments must be involved from the beginning:

- Custody staff must approve all containers, because some may pose a security risk;
- Medical staff must approve medications and dosages;
- Commissary staff—or whoever is going to provide the medications—must make access a priority.

Inmate education. It is important to educate inmates before implementing the program. We developed a self-care sheet that provides written information on signs and symptoms of common colds, flu, and sore throats. It also includes information on prevention, comfort measures, and, most importantly, when to come to sick call.

In addition, we encourage commissary and custody staff to refer to nursing staff any inmates who repeatedly request over-the-counter medications. Although our goal is to provide the most cost-effective health care possible, such measures are important in providing a safety net for those who may be trying to self-treat a condition that requires professional care.

Adequate access. Providing adequate access to over-the-counter medications is very important. A commissary that is open only once a

week will not suffice. Colds and flu, although self-limiting, can cause considerable discomfort. Inadequate access will require inmates to request sick call; it may also lead to an increase in inmate grievances related to a lack of health care access.

Prices for the medications should be set realistically so that cost is not a major obstacle to inmates. Indigent inmates must have access, free of charge, to at least those medications that relieve pain and discomfort. This alone is a real challenge. The system must provide indigent inmates sufficient access to medication but not allow for abuse. In our system, the commissary purchases the medications with Inmate Welfare Fund moneys. All proceeds from sales go to the fund, which is the source of payment for indigent inmates' medications.

Program analysis. It is also important to track and analyze program statistics to determine if the program is cutting costs and allocating resources better. If results suggest an increase in communicable diseases or acute care needs, the program should be evaluated to determine if these patterns are related to inmates' treating themselves when they should be coming to sick call. If that is the case, measures must be implemented to improve intervention procedures for failed self-care.

San Bernardino County's Experience with the Program

With these considerations and goals in mind, the San Bernardino Sheriff's Department implemented the over-the-counter medication program in January 1993. The medications available are acetaminophen, ibuprofen (Advil), cough drops, throat lozenges, Sudafed, Actifed, anti-fungal cream and powder, antacid tablets, and vitamins without

It is important that the agency procedures provide a safety net for inmates who may try to self-treat a condition that requires professional care.

iron. Indigent inmates are allowed ibuprofen or acetaminophen, but not both, Actifed or Sudafed, anti-fungal cream, and antacid tablets.

When inmates who come to sick call need only over-the-counter medications, they are told to get them from the commissary. Our biggest challenge has been to provide timely access and avoid abuse. For example, in our experience, inmates quickly learn to become indigent. In addition, those who are indigent may order everything for which they are eligible and then trade these medications for other items.

Because our commissary is unable to make over-the-counter medications available more than once per week, we plan to begin providing these items in the housing units. Custody staff will distribute the medications,

and a form will be used to debit the inmate's account. The form will also serve as an inventory tool to track when medications need to be replaced.

Project Outcomes

In spite of the difficulties we have had, the program has been successful. In the six months the program has been in operation at the West Valley Detention Center, sick call use has decreased 17 percent, though the facility's average daily population has increased by 16 percent in the same period. At another facility, sick call has decreased 20 percent. In addition, for both facilities, pharmacy costs have been reduced from an average of \$52,137 per month to \$27,200 per month.

The reduction in the use of sick call has made it possible to allocate more health care staff time to infection control, prevention, and education. An additional area we have begun to address is inmates' need for aftercare when they are released. Aftercare is especially important for those with chronic mental illness and those being treated for a communicable disease. As health care providers, we have a responsibility to the individual and the community to assist in ensuring continuity of care upon release.

In any health care setting, care includes educating patients to be informed, participative, and responsible health care consumers.

Teaching patients self-care and prevention is an essential component of health care delivery, whether in the community or a custody setting. Health care is a concern to inmates, and we as health care providers can use the correctional setting to teach self-care and prevention.

For additional information, contact Maria Lawrence, Administrator of Medical Services, San Bernardino County Sheriff's Department, 655 East Third Street, San Bernardino, California, 92415-0061; (909) 387-3636. ■

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