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New study finds problems accessing medications through Medicare Part D associated with increased emergency room visits

ARLINGTON, Va. (September 1, 2009) – Patients with mental illness who had problems accessing medications through a Medicare Part D plan were more likely to visit a psychiatric emergency department according to study in the September issue of *Psychiatric Services*, a journal of the American Psychiatric Association.

The study looked at medication access problems and use of intensive services (i.e., care provided in psychiatric emergency rooms and inpatient psychiatric units) among people who were dually eligible for Medicaid and Medicare benefits. Forty-four percent of dually eligible patients experienced a problem accessing medications, and those who had a problem were significantly more likely to visit an emergency department, but were not more likely to use inpatient psychiatric care.

In the United States, about one-third of people who are dually eligible for Medicare and Medicaid have a mental disorder, and prescription medications are often key to their treatment. In 2006, dually eligible people were required to begin receiving prescriptions through Medicare Part D; previously their medications had been fully covered under Medicaid. The shift raised concerns about potential access problems among the vulnerable population of dually eligible people with mental illness because all Part D drug plans use some form of utilization management, such as restricting the choice of drugs to those on a selected list.

“The findings raise concerns about potential offsets and possible negative effects on quality of care that should be examined,” according to the study’s lead author Haiden A. Huskamp, Ph.D with the Department of Health Care Policy at Harvard Medical School.

Access problems documented in the study included patients unable to access clinically indicated refills or new prescriptions because the drugs were not covered or approved, patients who had to switch to a difference drug because a refill was not covered or approved and patients who had problems because of copayments.

Study authors included Haiden A. Huskanmp, Ph.D. and Richard G. Frank, Ph.D. with Harvard Medical School, and Joyce C. West, Ph.D., P.P.P., Donald S. Rae, M.A., Maritza Rubio-Stipec, Sc.D., and Darrel A. Regier, M.D., M.P.H. with the American Psychiatric Institute for Research and Education.

About the American Psychiatric Association

The American Psychiatric Association is the nation's leading medical specialty society whose more than 38,000 physician members specialize in prevention, diagnosis, treatment and research of mental illnesses including substance use disorders. Visit the APA at www.psych.org and www.HealthyMinds.org.

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