

Opioid treatment programs brace themselves as two health crises collide

Opioid treatment programs are now facing two health care crises.

Patients rely on treatment facilities for obtaining medication-assisted treatment. But providers are trying to reduce the number of in-person visits and the risk of patients being exposed to Covid-19.

"The reality is, the opioid crisis has not gone anywhere," said Allegra Schorr, president of the Coalition of Medication Assisted Treatment Providers and Advocates of New York State. "These two crises crashing into each other is the big fear."

To help ease some of the strain, opioid treatment programs have turned to telemedicine and take-home doses of drugs for medication-assisted treatment.

Dr. Jonathan Samuels, head of the addiction medicine program at SBH Health System, said SBH has more than 600 patients who are prescribed methadone, Suboxone or a Vivitrol injection. The program has upped the number of extended doses for patients, but the effort has been a balancing act of individually assessing the risk of overdose with that of contracting and having severe complications from Covid-19.

Now about 150 patients come in once a month, 100 once every three weeks, 120 once every two weeks and 150 three times a week, Samuels said. SBH is also staggering in-person visits to reduce patients in the waiting room from as many as 30 to just a handful. Telephone visits also are being used.

Dr. Joel Idowu, chairman of the Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Health Sciences at Richmond University Medical Center, echoed the importance of telemedicine during the crisis. Some of the loosened regulations on initial visits for addiction treatment have been particularly helpful, he said. .

Dr. Harshal Kirane, medical director and assistant professor of psychiatry at the Zucker School of Medicine at Hofstra/Northwell, is navigating the Covid-19 outbreak as he readies to open Wellbridge Addiction Treatment and Research in Calverton, Long Island, in May.

"We, over the last two decades, have had an incredibly complex drug and alcohol crisis with tremendous implications for the mental health needs of Americans," Kirane said. "In so many ways, the Covid-19 outbreak is only going to intensify some of the underlying fractures in the framework of how people manage mental health issues."

Demand for opioid treatment programs may even rise during the pandemic as individuals struggling with addiction worry as the virus spreads.

As demand ticks up, the entire health care industry is facing workforce shortages.

Though telehealth has helped to ease some of the strain, providers at opioid treatment programs are facing their own health concerns and child care issues.

Schorr noted that some hospital-based programs have been asked to redeploy doctors, nurses and staff to other parts of the facility during the pandemic. She added that the association is working with the city and the state to try to come up with ways to fill some of the gaps in addiction treatment.

For patients who are stable, take-home doses of medication are essential, she said. The association recently [detailed the importance](#) of reimbursement reforms for take-home doses in presenting Medicaid redesign recommendations to the state.

However, during the pandemic, it's the patients who are earlier on in their treatment journey and have comorbidities that opioid treatment programs are most worried about, Schorr said.