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Narcotic Allergy?

Every time a new resident is admitted to one of our facilities with a “codeine allergy”, I cringe. It is rare for an individual to actually be allergic to narcotics, and being labeled this way severely limits treatment options when analgesia is required.

Most commonly, narcotic adverse effects are confused with allergies. A patient may have experienced nausea, dizziness or hallucinations while taking a narcotic and the individual or a family member wrongly considered this to be an allergy.

Some people do experience allergy-like symptoms when taking opioids. These individuals may develop red, itchy rashes when histamine is released from their mast cells. Often changing to a different narcotic, or pre-treating with Benadryl® or another antihistamine resolves the problem.

If a resident or family member recounts a story of

breathing difficulties or severe rash, allergy should be suspected. If the causative narcotic was in the codeine/morphine family, a structurally different agent, such as fentanyl, will often be safe. If the drug that caused the problem cannot be identified, a non-narcotic alternative may be required.

Zyprexa® Goes Generic

Another expensive medication has been genericized. Novopharm’s olanzapine was added to the provincial formulary this week. This change will save Ontario taxpayers many millions of dollars this year alone.

Novo-olanzapine tablets are the same size, shape and colour as their Zyprexa® counterparts. Each tablet is engraved with the strength on one side, and the letter “N” (for Novopharm) on the other. Unfortunately, the engraving is not as prominent as the blue ink imprint that appears on the name brand product.

Advair Dose Counter

GlaxoSmithKline has recently added a neat gizmo onto their Advair® aerosol inhalers. The inhalers now come with a “dose counter” on the back.

Trying to decide when to reorder inhalers has always been a tricky endeavour. After much shaking, an experienced



nurse can usually determine how much remains, but occasionally inhalers run out unexpectedly, creating a temporary crisis.

The nurse must perform one simple operation before the Advair® inhaler is ready to use. The inhaler must be shaken, and one spray released into the air. This process is to be repeated until the counter reads “120”. At that point, the inhaler is primed and ready to use. Typically, the inhaler will show a count of 124 when it is dispensed to the facility.

GeriatRx will affix an instruction seal over the top of the box which briefly explains this procedure. Remember, when the counter reaches “0” **there is no medication left!** The inhaler may still contain propellant, which could give the impression that it is still useable. Please reorder when the counter reaches “20”.

Dementia Patch

The FDA has just approved Exelon® in a topical patch dosage form. This will allow the medication to be given to residents with swallowing disorders. The product has not been released in Canada yet, but hopefully patients will respond well and it will be available to us soon.

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