



Safe Prescribing of Opioids for Pain and Reduction of Opioid Misuse

Veterinarians Join Efforts to End the Opioid Crisis in Iowa

This E-blast from the Iowa Department of Public Health (IDPH) focuses on informing veterinarians about the opioid crisis in the United States, particularly in Iowa, and on their role in reducing the misuse of opioid medications prescribed and dispensed for the treatment of animals in their care.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), in 2012, health care providers wrote 259 million prescriptions for opioid pain relievers – enough for every American adult to have a bottle of pills. Prescription opioid sales in the United States have increased by 300% since 1999, even though there has not been an overall change in the amount of pain Americans report. In a study by the International Narcotics Control Board, the United States accounts for nearly 100% of the Hydrocodone used globally and 81% of Oxycodone used.

Although prescription drug overdose deaths and rates of opioid prescribing in Iowa are low compared with other states, evidence of the opioid crisis in Iowa is growing. According to data from the IDPH Bureau of Health Statistics (2017), opioid related deaths increased from 59 in 2005, to 180 in 2016, and treatment admissions for opioid use disorders have increased from 608 to 2,274 during the same timeframe.



Role for Veterinarians in Reducing Opioid Misuse

As prescribers and dispensers of medications for the treatment of animals in their care, veterinarians are sources of opioids that can be diverted and misused. Veterinarians can help reduce opioid misuse in several ways:

- **Recognize the potential for diversion of opioid prescriptions for pets.** Drug diversion occurs when prescription medicines are obtained or used illegally (CDC, 2017). Veterinarians need to recognize that various individuals, including pet owners, family members, handlers, and practice staff, may engage in diversion of opioid prescriptions intended for pets. Veterinarians typically do not prescribe or dispense the opioids that are widely misused by humans such as Vicodin, OxyContin or Percocet; however, they do dispense tramadol, ketamine, hydrocodone and other substances that are also sought by those who misuse opioids.
- **Recognize signs of opioid misuse among pet owners and others.** Signs of potential opioid misuse by pet owners and others include (1) requests for early refills of prescriptions; (2) requests for refills of prescriptions while missing appointments; (3) requests for opioid medications by name; (4) few signs of improvement in a pet's condition; (5) claims that medications were lost or stolen; (6) the pet's condition does not match the owner's description; and (7) new clients with seriously injured animals (Mercer, 2017).
- **Learn the requirements and best practices for prescribing and storing opioids.** The American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) provides guidelines for veterinary prescription drugs, including appropriate labeling, recordkeeping, handling, storage, and disposal (AVMA, 2018). These guidelines include Principles of Veterinary Medical Ethics. AVMA advocates for investigations and actions associated with illegal prescription drug distribution.



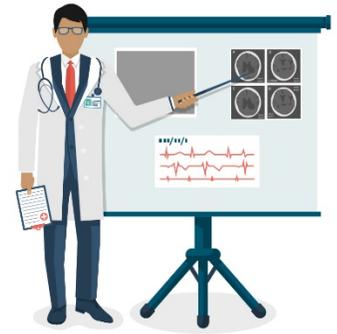
Other key resources regarding prescribing and storing opioids are the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), and Iowa's Board of Veterinary Medicine and Board of Pharmacy.

Examples of requirements and best practices include:

- Prescribing medications for a pet only if there is a veterinarian–client–patient relationship (to prevent “doctor shopping”)
- Including required information on prescriptions, such as client and patient names, date issued, medication name, strength, and quantity, refills, directions for use, expiration date of the drug
- Placing prescription medications in tamper-resistant containers if the drugs are not dispensed in their original containers (to prevent access by children)

- **Learn how to talk with pet owners and others about opioid misuse.** Pet owners and others can make a difference in reducing opioid misuse if they are aware of the risks associated with prescription opioids. Veterinarians can provide important home safety tips for storage to prevent diversion and inadvertent exposure to opioids and for proper disposal of expired or unused prescriptions in a safe and responsible way.

- **Know how to take action if misuse of opioids prescribed for a pet is suspected.** Be familiar with requirements established by Iowa's Board of Pharmacy and Board of Veterinary Medicine, the DEA, and the FDA for responding to incidents involving the theft, shortage, sale, and use of opioids without a prescription.



If you suspect a pet owner is misusing a controlled substance intended for their animal (or to report controlled substance thefts), contact:

1. Drug Enforcement Administration at 515-284-5709, and
2. Local law enforcement

If you suspect a veterinarian or veterinary technician of misusing controlled substances, contact:

1. Iowa Board of Veterinary Medicine at 515-281-8617, and
2. File a complaint with the Iowa Board of Pharmacy at <https://pharmacy.iowa.gov/miscellaneous/file-complaint>

References

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- Robinson, N. (2016). More ways to minimize opioid reliance and how veterinarians can help manage pain without using opioids. *Veterinary Practice News*, September 2016.