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Handheld Tools Help Combat Methamphetamine Scourge

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Some 20 months after enactment of the Combat Methamphetamine Epidemic Act of 2005, hospital pharmacies and pharmacists are using a variety of approaches for logging adult purchasers of nonprescription remedies containing ephedrine, pseudoephedrine and phenylpropanolamine (PSE), and the introduction of a handheld technology could speed the process even more.

PSE is the main substance targeted by the law because it was present in many popular over-the-counter (OTC) cold remedies and could be extracted to make the illegal drug methamphetamine, also called crystal meth. The drug continues to be a national epidemic, with more teens, women and minorities abusing methamphetamine in communities throughout the United States, according to a new survey by the National Association of Counties. It is the leading illegal drug problem in 47% of the counties surveyed.

Although there are far more sales of PSE products in retail pharmacies than in health-system outpatient pharmacies, *Pharmacy Practice News* contacted outpatient pharmacies to determine the ways they have chosen to comply with the law, which was incorporated into the Patriot Act, and whether or not the requirements to log in adult purchasers disrupted their outpatient operations.

Avoiding "Onerous" Compliance

Montefiore Medical Center decided "not to sell anything that would be an issue with the Patriot Act," said Steven Tuckman, RPh, outpatient pharmacy manager at the Bronx, N.Y., hospital. "Compliance with the law would have been onerous, especially without an automated system to take care of it. The law is a good idea, but implementation isn't for everybody."

The Montefiore outpatient pharmacy sells only "a smattering of OTC items," he added. "We never tried a manual logging process. We simply never sold the affected product." Rather, he replaced the PSE items with reformulated brands containing the nasal decongestant phenylephrine. It was an easier way to comply without committing limited staff resources. "I would reconsider our decision if there was an electronic solution, as long as it was fast, accurate and private."

In Nashville, Tenn., the Vanderbilt Medical Center Children's Hospital outpatient pharmacy sells only about two or three units of PSE products per week and keeps a manual logbook to comply with the law, said staff pharmacist Jim Nicks, RPh. "It's not an issue for us; 99.9% of our business is prescriptions, so we have minimal attraction to an electronic solution."

Specifically, the federal law, which went into effect March 9, 2006, requires sellers to log the name, address, date and time of purchase, product and amount bought and obtain a signature from the buyer. All the information is to be confirmed by a government-issued photo identification. The law restricts purchasers to 3.6 g daily of PSE. Additionally, PSE products must be stored beyond the reach of pharmacy patients. Before the federal act, regulation was left to the states.

Pharmacists Get a Hand

This time-intensive manual process of logging buyer and purchase details, which the pharmacy needs to retain for two years and keep secure in order to protect privacy, has led to the launch of a new handheld technology.

ComplyScan enables the capture and management of data electronically. The system is driven by proprietary software developed by Pharmitas, Bellevue, Wash., which can be used with the Image Kiosk 8570 or the Dolphin 7900 Mobile Computer from Hand Held Products, Skaneateles Falls, N.Y.

Using either the mini-kiosk or mobile computer, retailers scan the two-dimensional bar code or swipe the magnetic strip on the consumer's driver's license to load their identification information into the log. Retailers then scan the product's UPC label, which automatically determines if the consumer is within the legal purchase limit.

The consumer then verifies the sale with an electronic signature and the transaction information is sent and stored in a secure database and server. A Pharmitas spokesperson told *Pharmacy Practice News* that a retail chain is scheduling a pilot test of the technology.