

Polypharmacy and Medicare beneficiaries with a focus on opioid use in Part D

ISSUE: The Commission’s examination of the effects of medication adherence on health spending has found that the effects of adherence vary across conditions and by beneficiary characteristics. We also found that it is difficult to control for all the factors that can influence this relationship. One factor that we have not previously examined is how use of multiple drugs (polypharmacy) can affect patients' medical conditions.

KEY POINTS: While some studies of adherence show reduced medical service use by adherent patients, studies of polypharmacy find that patients with high drug use have increased adverse events, which can trigger increased use of medical services. These conflicting results can be ascribed, in part, to different definitions of the problem, different data, and research designs. The elderly, who are more likely to suffer from multiple chronic conditions, are at high risk for polypharmacy. A widespread use of opioids among Medicare beneficiaries is a concern because patients taking opioids generally take many medications for other comorbid conditions not associated with pain.

ACTION: Commissioners should comment on the substance of this research and discuss any issues raised by it.

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