



# The Florida Academy of **PAIN MEDICINE** Integration & Innovation

## **Column: Don't punish legitimate pain sufferers**

By Karen Westover, special to the Tampa Bay Times

As a 48-year-old mother suffering from three compression fractures and herniated discs in my spine that have been diagnosed as inoperable, I've had to learn how to manage debilitating back pain. On some days, the pain is so severe it is almost impossible to get out of bed without the aid of pain medicines prescribed by my doctor.

But lately, getting my prescriptions filled has become its own unique form of pain. And I know that I'm not alone. Beginning in 2011, I started noticing that my regular pharmacy, a major national chain, was experiencing shortages of the medicines I needed.

Because my doctor prescribed a controlled substance to help manage my back pain, responsible pharmacies are rightfully vigilant in their efforts to prevent abuse. One of the measures adopted by some pharmacies is to limit the amount of certain medicines that the pharmacy can dispense each month. When the monthly supply is gone, that's all they can dispense until the next month.

While this arbitrary restriction has a real impact on patients like me who are suffering and desperately in need of pain relief, the shock of being turned away from one's regular pharmacy is only the beginning of the ordeal. Patients who are turned away at their primary pharmacy are forced to seek relief at an alternative location.

But due to confusion over a state law passed in 2011, the act of visiting a different pharmacy often triggers suspicions by the pharmacy staff that the prescription-seeker may not be a legitimate patient, but rather someone who is abusing the prescription drug. To combat this type of abuse, many pharmacies have a checklist they use to screen out would-be prescription drug abusers.

Unfortunately, the checklists don't differentiate very well between drug abusers and legitimate patients seeking relief. Criteria such as distance from the patient's home address to the pharmacy, frequency of visits and previous stores visited all can trigger a denial at the pharmacist's counter. It's easy to see how a legitimate patient could be confused with someone seeking to obtain prescriptions illegally.

In my case, things got worse before they got better. Compounding the problem for legitimate patients like me, the most effective medicines often come with severe side effects, especially if the dosage is interrupted.

After being told my prescription was out of stock at my primary pharmacy, I did the next logical thing: I drove to another location where, after looking up my account, I was told they couldn't fill my prescription because the location was more than 5 miles from my primary residence.

What's a patient to do? I visited a third pharmacy in an ever more desperate quest to get the medicine my doctor prescribed for me. It didn't even occur to me at the time that my effort to fill the prescription made me look suspicious, especially to a pharmacist who didn't know me, but who could look in the computer system and tell that I was far from my normal location and had already visited several other pharmacies in the same chain.

With withdrawal symptoms already beginning to take their toll, and my back pain making it increasingly intolerable to travel, I turned to my doctor for help. She took it upon herself to place calls to several area pharmacies and was able to finally locate a lower dosage form of the same medicine, which provided temporary relief until my normal pharmacy received its monthly replenishment.

When she called to give me the news, I thanked her for her help. But she told me that I'm not the only pain patient she's had to help out lately, and expressed her concern that pharmacies were being too cautious as a result of confusion over the recent changes in state law.

Legitimate pain patients should never be subjected to interminable delays, shortages, or worse, outright suspicion that they are breaking the law. It's time for state lawmakers to take another look at fixing these problems for legitimate pain sufferers.

*Karen Westover lives in New Port Richey. She wrote this exclusively for the Tampa Bay Times.*