Medicaid Study: Prescribing Errors in Half of Aged

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SEATTLE — Nearly half of a sample of elderly persons in Los Angeles were given medications that they probably should not have been taking, and the problem rose sharply with the number of prescriptions, Gretchen E. Alkema said at the annual research meeting of AcademyHealth.

Among elderly persons who were taking 12 or more medications, 70% had one or more medication problems, and among those taking 7-9 medications, 50% had one or more medication problems.

The elderly frequently end up being given a medication that they shouldn't be using or being given too many medications, said Ms. Alkema of the Davis School of Gerontology at the University of Southern California, Los Angeles, in a poster presentation.

The study looked at a cohort of 615 individuals in a Medicaid waiver program. The subjects were living at home but were at risk for institutionalization. Their average age was 80 years, about 40% were living alone, and 60% spoke English.

A pharmacist reviewed their medications, looking for four types of medication problems: unnecessary therapeutic duplication, inappropriate psychotropic medication, cardiovascular medication problems, and inappropriate NSAID use. Overall, 49% had one medication problem, 19% had two medication problems, and 5% had three or more problems.

The most common type of problem was therapeutic duplication, followed by inappropriate psychotropic use and cardiovascular medication problems. One important risk factor associated with medication error was that the individual had been to a hospital, emergency department, or skilled nursing facility in the past year. Those contacts with the medical system doubled the risk of a problem. ■