



Medication Shortages

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Medication shortages have continued to increase over the past few years, tripling from 5 years ago. Today there are more than 200 medications that are in short supply. Sadly, drug shortages have led to 15 deaths over the past two years due to patients not getting the treatment they need or receiving the wrong alternative therapy.

The medicines that are mainly affected are older, generic medications. Medications in highest demand are intravenous electrolytes and chemotherapy drugs. There are many reasons for these shortages. Some manufacturers stop making medications for financial reasons, others have to halt production due to manufacturing quality problems enforced by the FDA. When one manufacturer stops producing a medication it forces other companies to work harder to pick up the slack, but they simply cannot keep up with the demand. And with fewer manufacturers producing generic medication (possibly due to smaller profit margin) we see a huge supply/demand imbalance when one manufacturer stops production.

For pharmacists, this means that we will be helping patients and clinicians find alternative therapies. The simplest solutions are switching to a different brand, using generics, changing the

strength, ordering different package sizes, or considering a different dosage form. In more difficult situations requiring a different medication, pharmacists would be responsible for suggesting alternative treatment options. In extreme shortage cases, the FDA may need to temporarily approve foreign medications to alleviate the shortage.

A helpful tool for pharmacists provided by the American Society of Health-System Pharmacists is a collaborative list of medications that are in short supply, as well as, reasons for the shortage, possible solutions, and anticipated dates for more supply. Law makers are working to require drug makers to report shortages to the FDA, but this is a challenging process. Medication shortages are a serious public safety threat and hopefully we will find a long-term solution soon. Some possible solutions include: providing incentives to manufacture medications that are in demand, requiring drug companies to report shortages, using European or Canadian manufacturers, and closely scrutinize mergers between generic drug companies. In the mean time, it is up to us as health care professionals to continue to educate and inform our patients, and to provide safe and effective treatments for them.