

Changing Dental Opioid Prescribing Practices Through Education and Monitoring

In 2019, Delta Dental of Washington found disparities in opioid prescribing practices between Washington State Dentists and published professional guidelines, even as the US struggled with an epidemic opioid addiction. Evidence shows that individuals under 24 years of age are more vulnerable to addiction issues if they receive prescription opioids. Some of the most routine surgeries done by dentists where patients receive prescription pain medications are for third molar extractions, usually completed on teenagers and young adults.



This project was a collaboration between Delta Dental of Washington, two of their largest purchasers, the Acora Foundation, and Healthentic. One purchaser voiced an interest in addressing prescribing practices for individuals under the age of 25. After looking at the data, the problem that Delta Dental identified was that a small percentage of their contracted dentists were routinely prescribing quantities of opioid medications that were inconsistent with published best-practice guidelines.



This project used two methods for implementation. The first was an educational program including informational materials for both patients and providers as well as CE courses for dental providers. The second was data sharing and analysis of prescribing practice consistency with guidelines, followed by further education and outreach to a small number of outlier providers who needed more support to change their prescribing practices.



Advice and lessons learned from this implementation effort include the following:

- Make sure that patients understand what an opioid is and the risks of taking them
- Emphasize standards for
 - dose and type of medication
 - duration of use,
 - and protocol for decision making around prescribing opioids
- Focus on opioid naïve populations for harm-reduction
- Data is a powerful tool to help providers assess their prescribing behaviors



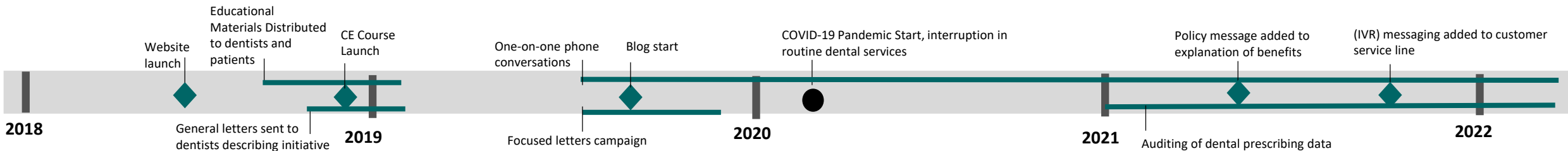
Outcomes of this implementation effort:

- 422 dentists received training
- 52,300 patient information brochures distributed
- 3 in-person trainings for 3 Federally Qualified Health Centers, Thurston County Dental Society, and Snohomish County Public Health Department
- General education letters sent
- Targeted education letters sent
- Counseling and awareness sessions with providers implemented
- There is no indication in the data that providers have reverted to previous prescribing practices.



The impact on prescribing practices as a proxy for prevention and harm reduction were:

- The percent of member providers prescribing opioids against guidelines dropped in Washington
- Lower potential for misuse, including over-consumption, recreational abuse, and selling
- Fewer pills prescribed leading to potential costs saving for the health system overall, and patients in particular
- Potential waste reduction in excess prescriptions and their removal from patients and home



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