

Nebraska Licensee Assistance Program

Alcohol/Drug abuse assistance for health service professionals licensed, certified or registered by the State of Nebraska

Addiction – The Risk of Prescription Pain Relief

The Nebraska Licensee Assistance Program (NE LAP) provides alcohol/drug assessments, treatment referrals, case management/monitoring and education services for Nebraska health service professionals. Would you have estimated that only 51 percent of our cases are alcohol related? You likely would have thought this figure would be higher considering the predominant role of alcohol use in our society. You can now see that almost half our cases, 49 percent, are drug abuse and drug addiction problem situations.

Do you question why the number of drug problem cases are so high? It is important to know that the majority of these cases are not related to use of illegal drugs. They are cases involving prescription drug abuse and addiction. Our society places a high value on use of prescription medications to relieve emotional and physical pain. Health care professionals who work in environments where medications are an integral, sometimes essential, component to pain relief and healing, place an even higher value on medication than the overall general population.

Health care professionals' values for medications can lead them to regularly turn to medications for pain relief rather than alternative solutions. If the medications are effective, it can cement their belief that the medications are their only pain relief solution. And as the medications provide physical and emotional relief, the concept that "more is better" can become a "must have" for pain.

However, most pain relief medications are controlled substances and carry risks. One need only review the instructions for the prescriptions in the *PDR Drug Guide for Mental Health Professionals* to find guidance, such as "may cause patients to become drowsy or less alert," or "avoid alcohol while taking this medication," or "taken with certain other drugs, the effects of either could be increased, decreased or altered," or "medication should be taken exactly as prescribed," and "tolerance and dependence can develop with the use" of this medication. Generally, emotional and pain relief medications "should not be taken for a longer time or for any other purpose than prescribed."

As you have seen from the NE LAP statistics, health care professionals can become victims of the drugs that they believe are so helpful and necessary for them. Abuse of the drug takes over and the drug is not taken as prescribed. More of the drug is needed. Other prescription drugs may be added to the mix. The drugs are used over a long period of time. Eventually, temporary use of medications for pain relief becomes a long term addiction on the drugs. In the midst of a drug addiction, the health care professional's impairment or diversion of drugs at work leads to loss of practice privileges or his/her job and a referral to the Nebraska Licensee Assistance Program.

If you are a licensed health service professional wanting more information about alcohol/drug abuse or addiction or other related issues, please contact the Nebraska Licensee Assistance Program (NE LAP) at (800) 851-2336 or (402) 354-8055 or visit our website at www.lapne.org. If you know of or are concerned about a colleague's or employee's alcohol/drug abuse, contact the NE LAP for appropriate intervention and ongoing support. You may be saving a life, a family or a career.