

Team 4: Doctor's Orders May Not Be Followed At Pharmacy

Insurance Companies May Want To Switch Prescriptions

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PITTSBURGH -- A Team 4 investigation found the drug your doctor prescribes may not always be the exact same drug you get at the pharmacy.

It could be a generic version or even a totally different drug that's known as a "therapeutic substitute."

For some people, the consequences can be severe.

Team 4's Paul Van Osdol has the story. What follows is a transcript of his report:

Drug switching is perfectly legal and it can be a good thing - generic drugs are cheaper than brand names.

In fact Pennsylvania law requires generics to be offered when they become available.

But for some people a switch in medication -- even to a generic -- can be life changing.

Melissa Linz has had epileptic seizures for most of her life. But four years ago she started using a drug that stopped her seizures and that made a huge difference.

Melissa Linz: "I was able to live a normal life. Quote, unquote normal. I was able to drive. I went to college."

Her medicine came in the mail every three months. But one day, the medicine was different.

Paul Van Osdol: "Had you requested the change?"

Melissa Linz: "No I did not."

Paul Van Osdol: "Had your doctor requested the change?"

Melissa Linz: "No."

Paul Van Osdol: "Who requested the change?"

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Melissa Linz: "Don't know. It just came in the mail"

It was the generic version of the medicine she had been taking. After she told her neurologist about the medicine he said her insurance company -- Highmark -- required her to try the generic. But it did not work -- the seizures returned. She was eventually able to return to the brand name drug, but by then it was too late.

Paul Van Osdol: "So you're having seizures again?"

Melissa Linz: "Yes."

Paul Van Osdol: "How often?"

Melissa Linz: "Well last month I had eight."

Because of the seizures Melissa cannot drive so she had to quit her job and move back with her parents.

Melissa Linz: "My seizures were under control and then all this had to happen. It's life changing. It's frustrating."

Citing privacy reasons, Highmark declined to discuss Melissa's case but the company's vice president of pharmacy says severe complications from drug switching are very rare.

Bob Wanovich, Highmark VP: "We have seen no scientific evidence. There are certainly anecdotal reports of patients that have switched drugs to generic etcetera and suggested they may not have been as effective."

A spokesman for Medco, the pharmacy that supplied the drugs, said, "The fact that patients know their drug was changed can sometimes influence their therapeutic response or their perception of the drug's effects."

But a study done earlier this year found epilepsy patients ending up in the hospital after a seizure were "80 percent more likely" to have had their anti-seizure drugs switched.

Melissa's situation is extreme but complications from drug switching are not unusual. The FDA does not require generics to be exactly the same as their brand name version. For most people that's not a problem but for some conditions it can literally be a matter of life or death.

Dr. Jay Zdunek, who runs a family practice in Beaver County and eastern Ohio, says he spends too much time fighting insurance companies over drug switching.

Paul Van Osdol: "Does something like that happen often?"

Dr. Jay Zdunek: "Happens every day."

He frequently has problems with Coumadin, a blood thinning brand drug, being switched to its generic

version Warfarin.

Dr. Jay Zdunek: "Warfarin is rat poison. It's a very therapeutic dose that you're using for these patients to try to thin their blood out enough so they don't get a blood clot but you don't want to make them a rat and kill them because you gave them too much."

And he says patients on anti-depressants are frequently forced to switch to generic drugs with severe consequences.

Dr. Jay Zdunek: "Every single day I have patients who go from being controlled to being uncontrolled and depressed again. None of this makes sense. It's a bureaucratic nightmare. It's a paper chase."

Bob Wanovich, Highmark VP: "A physician can write a prescription today and say substitution is not permissible."

But pharmacist Joseph Bettinger says it's not that easy.

Joseph Bettinger: "Insurance companies balk at that because it may be more expensive."

Like Dr. Zdunek, Bettinger frequently finds himself in a bureaucratic battle when medicines are switched.

Joseph Bettinger: "It makes it difficult for the doctor, the patient and the pharmacist because it's not smooth sailing."

Melissa Linz wants that to change.

Melissa Linz: "Why does someone sitting behind a desk have a right to make that decision for a doctor?"

Because the drugs are no longer working Melissa will undergo brain surgery next month.

There are some steps you can take to prevent a medication switch from causing harm.

First -- always check your medicine when you pick it up at the pharmacy. If it's not what you thought it should be, ask the pharmacist and your doctor. When your doctor writes the prescription you can ask him or her write that the brand is medically necessary.

But keep in mind that could end up costing you a lot more money if your insurance does not cover it.

The FDA actually says it has no power to regulate drug switching. However, epilepsy advocates have pushed the FDA to add a warning label to generic anti-seizure drugs. On that issue the FDA takes the same position as Highmark and Medco, that there's not enough evidence right now to make a change.

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