Management of Your Patient’s Postoperative Pain

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“Doc, I need to tell you something.” After 22 years of practicing Oral and Maxillofacial Surgery this is an account of what a patient told me at the start of his consultation for another dental implant. He was a patient of mine multiple times over the last 10 years. About 3 years ago, I extracted his then 17 year old child's wisdom teeth. With a solemn look on his face, he proceeded to recount the story of his child's addiction to narcotic pain medications. His story resonated with me, and I reflected on my pain management protocol.

For years, my typical postoperative pain medication regimen for the young and healthy wisdom teeth patient consisted of Ibuprofen and Vicodin. It was rare that any patient requested a refill of their Vicodin during the healing process. The patient's pain was controlled and I felt that the prescriptions were appropriate. I knew there was an opioid crisis but believed this crisis was a consequence outside of my control. I felt that in order to do my part, I would look to ways to reduce my prescribing tactics.

As with all treatment modalities, the most important skill we have is in earning our patients’ trust for our treatment recommendations, be these tried and true techniques, or something new and different we have to offer. A shift in prescribing postoperative pain medication is no different. As OMS, many of us have spent the extra time it takes to educate a patient when they do not need an antibiotic, or do not require extensive TMJ surgery. The art is in the explanation and the delivery of that explanation. Based on the individual, we develop the most effective way to explain a situation or process to a patient. It is important that you find what works for you and your specific patient population, to effectively explain your rationale for postoperative pain management goals.

For instance, in Pennsylvania, there is mandatory reporting when a narcotic prescription is filled. I inform patients, and parents if a minor, of this fact and make them aware that there will not be a record of the opioid prescription unless it is filled. This can serve as a deterrent to filling the prescription unless absolutely necessary. I also have a strict procedure in place to manage after hour requests for additional pain medication.

As I implemented a variation to my prescribing regimens, I learned a few things about patients and, if a minor, their parent’s, knowledge of certain pain medications. Many patients may not recognize that Tylenol and Advil are not one in the same. Most have some sort of NSAID at home but many do not have Tylenol. Many parents think Tylenol is only good for fevers and is not a very effective pain medication. Many people are confused about the different over the counter pain medications and the brand names versus generic names. They do not know that acetaminophen is Tylenol. They are unaware of the milligram strength of over the counter Ibuprofen and Tylenol. If we ask patients to utilize these over the counter pain remedies, we need to educate them on what they are, how effective these can be for pain management, and how much medication to safely and effectively use. Your post-operative instruction sheet can include a section to specifically document...
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what is recommended. Your office staff should be fully aware of this information as well, so
when patients call with questions regarding medications, they have the correct information to
accurately assist the patient.

Many OMS have implemented other strategies to manage postoperative pain such as long
acting local anesthesia. Each practitioner needs to find what works best for their specific patient
population and how to reduce or eliminate the use of opioids whenever appropriate. As doctors,
we can take steps to provide better education to patients on how to manage their pain with non-
opioid options. There is an abundance of information for providers and patients. OMSNIC offers
resources related to the patient education process, while the AAOMS published a White Paper
titled “Opioid Prescribing: Acute and Postoperative Pain Management” provides prescription
guidelines.

OMSNIC Opioid Related Resources

How to access the opioid related resources:

2. Click on “Clinical and Office Documents” on the left side of the page.
3. Under the heading “Opioid Resources” you will find the following resources:
   - Informational Guide Regarding Opioids
   - A Sample Patient Education Form
   - Publicly available resources from AAOMS, the CDC, and HHS