



BULLETIN

No. 17-14

August 29, 2017

California workers' compensation claims that involve mental health disorders are slightly less likely to involve opioids in the first three months following the injury (the acute phase), but are more likely to have opioids introduced later in the life of the claim, and injured workers who file these claims end up with both more opioid prescriptions and higher strength opioids.

New CWCI research uses data from 368,538 California workers' compensation indemnity claims from accident years (AY) 2006 through 2015 to measure the prevalence, volume, and strength of opioid prescriptions dispensed to injured workers who had mental health (mood or anxiety) disorders, and to compare those results to other indemnity claims in which there was no mental disorder. The study tracks changes in the prevalence and volume of opioid prescriptions for both populations at 3, 12, 24, 36, 48 and 60 months post injury across all 10 accident years. The results show that:

- Between one quarter and one third of indemnity claims -- with or without a mental health disorder -- had opioids prescribed within three months of the injury, with opioids slightly less prevalent among the claims with mental health disorders during this acute injury phase.
- At 12 months post injury, opioids were generally more prevalent among claims with mental health disorders; and at 24 months and beyond opioids were more prevalent among the mental health disorder claims across all 10 accident years.
- The average number of opioid prescriptions per claim was higher for injured workers with mental health disorders at all stages of claim development in all 10 accident years, and widened as the claim aged, though comparing the average number of prescriptions at the same development periods across different accident years shows the volume of opioid prescriptions has diminished in recent accident years.
- Claims with mental health disorders were more likely to have opioids introduced later in the claim, so at 5 years post injury, 60.7 percent of the claims with mental health disorders had involved opioids vs. less than half of the claims without mental health disorders.
- Prior to the SB 863 limits on the use of permanent disability add-ons for psychiatric injuries, mental health (mood and anxiety) disorders had become an increasingly prevalent component of California workers' compensation lost-time claims, increasing from 1 out of 9 claims in AY 2006 to nearly 1 out of 6 claims in AY 2009 and AY 2010. Since AY 2011, however, there has been a steady decline in the percentage of indemnity claims involving mental health disorders, which represented less than 1 in 10 claims in AY 2013, and less than 1 in 20 claims in AY 2015 (though the percentage of claims with mental disorders in AY 2013-2015 will likely increase as the claims age).

- The average potency of the opioids dispensed was significantly higher for injured workers with mental health disorders than for those without mental health disorders. For example, for AY 2011 injuries, the average morphine milligram equivalents (MMEs) per opioid prescription was 51.4 percent higher for claims with mental health disorders.
- Among claims with mental health disorders, psychotropic drugs (antidepressants, antianxiety agents, and antipsychotics) were more prevalent than opioids in the acute stage of the claim (within 3 months of the injury), but became less prevalent than opioids in the chronic injury phase of the claim (after 3 months), as the psychotropic utilization rate for these claims only increased from 34.8 percent at the 3-month benchmark to 40.4 percent at 5 years post injury, while the opioid utilization rate more than doubled over the same time frame, indicating much more growth in the use of opioids to treat injured workers with mental health disorders as claims age.

CWCI has published a full report on the study, including background information, graphics, analyses and commentary in a Spotlight Report, “Differential Use of Opioids in California Workers’ Compensation Claims with Mental Health Disorders.” CWCI members and subscribers can access the report in the Research section at www.cwci.org. Others may purchase the report for \$16 from the Institute’s online store at www.cwci.org.

BY/

Copyright 2017 California Workers’ Compensation Institute

CWCI members may log in to www.cwci.org to view Bulletins and Research Reports. Nonmembers with subscriptions may log in under Resources (subscriber files). Public information is also on the website and nonmembers may order Bulletin/Research subscriptions from the online store.