Rhode Island Is Using E-Prescribing Data to Track H1N1

BY MARY ELLEN SCHNEIDER

Public health officials in Rhode Island are using electronic pharmacy data to track the use of oseltamivir and other antiviral medications being used to treat patients infected with the pandemic influenza A(H1N1).

As part of an ongoing partnership with Surescripts, an electronic prescribing network, all 181 pharmacies in Rhode Island now can send and receive electronic prescription information over a secure network. As a result, pharmacies are able to transmit information to the Rhode Island Department of Health on all antiviral prescriptions written in the state. Even if a physician uses a handwritten prescription, the information is available from the pharmacy’s electronic system.

At a press conference, Dr. David Gifford, director of the Rhode Island Department of Health, said prescriptions for antiviral medications provide a good proxy measure for infection with H1N1 virus and are a complement to other surveillance systems such as school absenteeism and emergency department visits.

Real-time electronic data on antiviral prescriptions also allow health officials to match supply and demand, he said. If prescriptions are about to outpace the supply, the health department can anticipate shortages in the antiviral supply and release more oseltamivir.

Additionally, if there are reports of a large volume of H1N1 illness in a community, but not a lot of prescribing of antiviral medication, there might be a need for more physician education, Dr. Gifford said. Conversely, if the pharmacy data show a large amount of antiviral prescribing in areas where there is not a lot of H1N1 activity, it could indicate inappropriate prescribing of oseltamivir (Tamiflu) for seasonal influenza, he said.

“This is really a whole new business,” said Mr. Hinkley.

Mr. Hinkley said to expect significant enforcement of HIPAA and HITECH beginning in the spring.

So “this is a great time to do a HIPAA compliance tune-up,” he added. “Go back and review your electronic health record system [and] all your practice procedures, talk to your vendors, and make sure everything is in compliance.”