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## Volunteers in Medicine

### Some pain medications not offered at free clinic

Policy on narcotics forcing some patients to go elsewhere for drugs

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For the past two years, Steve Hendricks has had his muscle relaxant and anti-anxiety prescriptions regularly filled at the Community Health Access Program clinic.

But when he recently tried to get the same prescriptions filled at the new Volunteers in Medicine free clinic — which replaced the CHAP clinic three weeks ago — he was denied.

“They told me they were considered controlled substances and I was out of luck,” said Hendricks, a 47-year-old Bloomington resident. “It really teed me off.”

Now Hendricks, who is unemployed and uses food stamps, must buy the drugs at full price from a pharmacy.

He said he now pays nearly \$50 for a month’s supply of the two medications, compared to the \$6 he paid at the CHAP clinic.

“This policy is going to hurt a lot of poor people like me,” he said. “I’m not a drug addict. I need these medications to control my anxiety, and to relieve muscle spasms in my back, which I broke several years ago.”

### Change in policy

Kelly Welsh, manager of Bloomington Hospital’s community health services, said the CHAP clinic did indeed fill prescriptions for controlled substances, also called narcotics, and benzodiazepines, also known as tranquilizers.

“The most common controlled substance the CHAP clinic provided was Lortab for pain relief,” she said. “Common benzodiazepines we provided were Valium and Xanax, used primarily for anxiety and sleep disorders.”

Welsh said these drugs were prescribed by the clinic’s nurse practitioner or part-time medical director to manage both acute and chronic conditions.

Dr. Rajih Haddawi, chairman of the VIM clinic's board of directors, confirmed that these types of drugs will not be filled by the VIM clinic's pharmacy.

### **Concerned about abuse**

Haddawi said the VIM clinic's policy is designed to discourage dependence on narcotics.

"In every medical practice there are some people who get used to narcotics, and we are not going to nurture that habit," he said. "We refuse to allow the narcotic seekers to bog down our mission."

But Haddawi said by the end of this month VIM will establish a twice-a-month, on-site spine clinic to evaluate and treat patients with chronic neck and spine pain.

"It will be staffed with specialists who could write a prescription for a narcotic, but that would be very rare," he said. "We're promoting this as a non-narcotic clinic."

Haddawi said if a VIM specialist feels the need to write a prescription for a narcotic, it would not be filled at the VIM pharmacy.

"Narcotic prescriptions would have to be filled outside our pharmacy," he said. "That will keep the VIM pharmacy clean and focused on our mission."

Haddawi said most of the narcotics prescribed could be filled at a regular pharmacy for less than \$10 each.

He added that if VIM specialists feel patients need help freeing themselves from narcotic dependence, they will refer them to the VIM clinic's weekly, on-site behavioral health counseling clinic.

"This clinic is designed for those who could be free from narcotics but are incapable of breaking their dependence on the drugs," he said.

Haddawi said that by late May or early June, the VIM pharmacy will be converted to a "medication room" that will be able to fill non-narcotic prescriptions anytime the VIM clinic is open.

That would be 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Fridays; 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. Mondays and Thursdays. The clinic is located at 333 E. Miller Drive.

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