Addiction Treatment Access Research Wins at American Society of Addiction Medicine Conference

Student-led research on the "Availability of Buprenorphine-Naloxone in Outpatient Pharmacies in South Florida" from the University of Miami Miller School of Medicine won the Representation in Research Award from the American Society of Addiction Medicine at its annual conference.

The winning abstract for the 53rd meeting originated with medical students Maria G. Rodriguez, B.S., and Alina Syros, M.P.H., while they served as staff members for the IDEA Clinic, which Miller School students run with a focus on providing patient care to people who inject drugs.

"Through this experience, we learned that medications for opioid use disorder (MOUD) can reduce mortality among people with opioid use disorder (OUD), yet patients continue to face multilevel barriers to treatment," Rodriguez said. "We developed a passion for helping patients undergoing treatment for opioid use disorder, and a desire to advocate for proper access to buprenorphine, an essential medication for the
treatment of OUD."

**Removing the Stigma**

Despite the positives of MOUD, less than 40% of outpatient pharmacies in South Florida (Miami-Dade, Broward, and Palm Beach counties) have buprenorphine immediately available to patients. As a result, patients often find themselves stuck in a cycle of illicit opioid use, which can lead to overdose and injection-related infections.

As a response to the "pill mills" of the early 2000s, Florida placed heavy restrictions on dispensing opioids from outpatient pharmacies, which may have impacted a pharmacy's willingness to provide buprenorphine. A group of Miller School students, led by Rodriguez and Syros, performed a telephone audit of local pharmacies to assess the availability of buprenorphine in South Florida pharmacies.

The study interviewed 200 randomly selected pharmacies in the tri-county area, with the majority being national chains as opposed to independent pharmacies. In total, 62% of pharmacies reported having no buprenorphine currently available, with chain pharmacies having a higher rate of carrying buprenorphine compared to independent ones.

“This study aims to raise awareness to the barriers this population faces,” Syros said. “Ultimately our goal is to use our findings to make meaningful changes at the pharmaceutical level and work to bridge these gaps in care.”

The Miller School will continue the study by doing follow-ups that look deeper into why pharmacies are not likely to carry buprenorphine, and other projects involving opioid use disorder in Miami and surrounding communities.
“Patients with opioid use disorder continue to face stigma within the health care community,” Rodriguez said. "Studies like this are necessary to show what disparities exist, and hopefully aid our advocacy efforts to improve care for Floridians with opioid addiction.”