The Importance of Informed Consent for Treatment with Psychotropic Medications
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Introduction
Medication adherence is a well-established challenge in medical and psychiatric care, with as many as one-third of patients not filling their initial prescriptions and another one-third taking only some of the medication. The knowledge that medication non-adherence is a challenge may paradoxically discourage prescribers from disclosing possible side effects to patients who seem ambivalent about taking psychotropic medications, tend to be somatically preoccupied, or often call between sessions.

Obtaining and documenting informed consent from clients for medications prescribed is required by the MHN Treatment Record Documentation Standards as well as by the American Psychiatric Association’s ethical standards which state that “before a patient agrees to treatment, he/she must be given a fair and reasonable explanation of what the treatment will entail, what risks the treatment involves, or the consent granted will not be effective” and may expose the practitioner to liability.

Recent Data
MHN treatment record audits in 2008 reveal that the most frequent type of information not documented is that patients were informed about possible medication side effects. In a 2008 survey of health plan members, only 82% reported that they were informed about possible side effects of medications by their prescribers. A common complaint by MHN members is that providers either did not sufficiently educate them about possible side effects, or did not respond appropriately to telephone calls about side effects. Many of these patients disclose during the investigation of their complaint that they discontinued not only the medication, but also the treatment, which suggests a rupture in the treatment alliance may also have occurred.

Recommendations
Ensuring patients are educated about the risks and side effects—along with the likely benefits—of medications may reduce not only complaints, but also between-session telephone calls. Patients who are well-informed may be less alarmed by the appearance of mild side effects and better able to cope with them until the next session. Participation in the development of a treatment plan, one component of which is informed consent about medications, increases the likelihood that patients will adhere to it, feel satisfied with their treatment, and may improve the outcome.

Not all side effects can be anticipated, and some patients will be more sensitive to, or less equipped to cope, than others with even mild side effects. This is why clinical judgment is so crucial for creating an individualized approach to educating patients about medications, how to cope with mild side effects, and when to notify prescribers about potentially serious ones. The benefit is that the client and practitioner become partners in the prescribing process rather than adversaries.

A note regarding practitioner resources: The MHN Treatment Record Documentation Standards and the Clinical Record Form, which contain a section for documenting that informed consent was obtained for medication, are available at www.mhn.com.