

Ensure your meds are right for you

[Tom Carney](#) / North Shore News

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It's been estimated that approximately 85 per cent of people over 65 years of age use prescription drugs.

A recent national study found that almost two-thirds of seniors take five or more drugs a day and one-quarter take a whopping 10 or more. These numbers do not include non-prescription medications such as over-the-counter painkillers, herbal medicines and vitamins.

A new study from the Therapeutics Initiative, an independent group that provides practical information on pharmaceuticals in B.C., found that B.C. doctors are continuing to prescribe multiple medications to seniors even though research suggests doing so can be harmful. The prescribing of multiple medications for one patient, especially seniors, is called polypharmacy.

There are, of course, guidelines in place for doctors when prescribing medications to patients. It seems to me that a guideline that says it is proper to prescribe five or 10 or more prescriptions to a patient isn't worth the prescription pad it's written on.

Now I'm not suggesting that prescription drugs aren't a good thing. We know that advances in pharmacology have brought huge benefits in treating a wide spectrum of ailments and improve quality of life. And sometimes it's not the drugs themselves that are the problem. For example, we routinely give drugs to people who probably don't need them. The rate of antidepressant use among seniors in facilities is three times higher than the rate for seniors living in the community and antipsychotic use is nine times higher. And we continue to give drugs to people who don't benefit from them. A recent B.C. study shows that thousands of Canadians with mild high blood pressure are being put on drugs that increase the risk of falls and hip fractures, yet have no proven benefits.

When the folks at the Therapeutics Initiative tell us that we are overmedicating seniors, we need to pay attention. Here is the challenge we face: as we age we are more likely to develop more chronic conditions and to see more specialists and health-care providers. There are new drug treatments for which none existed previously. And treating people with drugs is almost always cheaper than treating them in hospital. Given that, everything points to seniors being prescribed more medications not less.

So, what to do? I think seniors who want to be proactive about their own health can take the initiative here. My view is that once a year seniors, family members and caregivers should have a conversation with their physician about the potential benefit and harm that comes with each drug they are taking. Seniors should know what medications they are taking and why.

When patients are prescribed a new medication they should ask their pharmacist to review the standard risks that come with taking any medication - including risks that one medication might conflict with another, some medications might have adverse reactions and some have severe side effects. Then, at least, you'll know that the medication you have been prescribed is right for you.

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