



Peter Rockholz
Deputy Commissioner

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Some Thoughts on Medication-Assisted Treatment (MAT)

A Message from the Office of the Commissioner

We rarely watch commercial television in our home. During an exception the other evening, my adolescent son and I were enjoying the chicken chili I so lovingly warmed up (pre-made from Stew Leonard's) before an evening show. An ad for erectile dysfunction medication was met by our mutual desire to not acknowledge it. The next commercial was for a hypertension medication, with a soothing female voice running through the long list of potential side effects including nausea, diarrhea and the like. That was it—so much for the chicken chili. A fine dining experience was ruined by a rude, unwanted intrusion. We bonded in a male-typed tirade on the stupidity of commercials. The result was a great opportunity for a lesson in media literacy.

Our medication-assisted American culture is experiencing its own adolescence. Some is clearly “over the edge,” but much of it has greatly improved the quality of lives for many individuals—particularly those who come into contact with our DMHAS healthcare system. That ‘60’s slogan, “better living through chemistry,” has truly proven its merits for many people who have suffered. Over the subsequent four decades, many with mental and/or substance use disorders have benefited from pharmacologic discoveries—some serendipitous and some resulting from scientific brain research that has been championed largely by our field. I recall as a kid when a family member was committed to Fairfield Hills Hospital, at age 16 in 1963, how we rejoiced that Thorazine had been recently proven effective in dealing with “brain chemistry imbalances.” A fortunate success story.

When we think of medication-assisted treatment, some think of the mainstay psychotherapeutic agents prescribed to individuals with serious mental illness. Others think of methadone used to help individuals with opiate dependence achieve stability in their lives. But the world of MAT has expanded considerably to include medications for smoking cessation, pain management, PTSD, alcohol craving, and those for a host of other behavioral, psychological and physical conditions.

The MAT world is growing and will require careful negotiation, continuous education and the responsible, client-centered and judicious selection of medications—always in combination with counseling and supports. The use of multiple medications, management of increased side effects, vigilance regarding at times undisclosed concurrent abuse of alcohol, illicit drugs and misuse of prescription medications, and monitoring for the risk of potentially lethal drug combinations will be increasingly important. And knocking on the MAT door are long-acting formulations, vaccines, gene therapies and the like. The heightened awareness of co-existing mental and substance use disorders requires that we all continue to re-tool. The old substance abuse treatment “modality” of “drug-free” is long gone.

I was raised, professionally, during the ‘70’s in the “drug-free” world of the therapeutic community (TC). For many years, I questioned the use of methadone and why maintenance clients didn’t all have plans to get off. This was simply reflective of my lack of education on the subject. But, following a 45-minute talk by Dr. Tom Kosten of Yale, my view was permanently changed. I now have the opportunity and privilege to educate others and to promote the use of this essential treatment tool across Connecticut. There remains much to be done to educate the many who collectively contribute to continued stigma against methadone, and other medications. But this is just a small part of the education we professionals, family members, advocates, citizens and—most importantly—our clients need.

So, let’s all learn more about MAT, and work diligently to find the best combinations of medications, recovery-oriented psychosocial treatments and supports to help each individual client. Let’s be open and informed about new medications that will be reaching the market, while maintaining a healthy skepticism to offset profit-driven product promotion. Just as I teach Wes the importance of media literacy, we should be sure to teach each other.

Comments are welcome at Peter.Rockholz@po.state.ct.us