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Former first lady
was a beacon of
hope for addicts **D3**



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New Rules To Pay Doctors for Suboxone

Drug Used To Help Addicts Kick Habit

BY OLIVIER LYTTERBROUCK
Journal Staff Writer

Doctors say they hope new Medicaid billing rules issued by the state this month will encourage more physicians to write prescriptions for the addiction-fighting drug Sub-

oxone by assuring they will be paid for their work.

The new rules direct the state's Medicaid insurers to reimburse physicians \$300 for an initial visit and standard fees for an unlimited number of follow-up visits with patients taking Suboxone. The change took effect July 1.

"The intent was to ensure that people with heroin addiction have access to these ser-

vices," said Julie Weinberg, state Medicaid director for the New Mexico Human Services Department, which issued the new rules.

Medicaid, the state and federal government funded health insurance program for the poor, serves about 500,000 New Mexicans, or approximately one quarter of the states population. Children 18 and under and young pregnant mothers

are the largest group covered.

The new rules also give physicians greater authority over whom to treat by eliminating "prior authorization" that required physicians to get an insurance company's approval before prescribing Suboxone to patients.

Suboxone is a brand-name drug used to treat people addicted to heroin and other opiates. Suboxone blocks the

agonizing withdrawal symptoms that discourage addicts from kicking a drug habit.

New Mexico has experienced an epidemic of heroin addiction in recent years. Heroin related criminal charges have increased in Bernalillo County District Court to nearly 1,200 cases last year, up from 179 cases in 2006.

But fewer than 30 Albuquerque physicians are trained and

certified to prescribe the drug, and addicts often have little success finding physicians to prescribe it, said Dr. Miriam Komaromy, medical director of the University of New Mexico's Project Echo addiction treatment program.

"The need is vast," she said. "I can't even tell you how many patients are begging to get on

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(Suboxone) treatment and can't find a doctor."

Komaromy, who trains physicians how to use Suboxone, said much of the shortage of physicians willing to prescribe Suboxone is a result of "inconsistent" reimbursement policies by insurance companies.

Komaromy said she hopes the rules change will encourage more doctors to provide drug treatment services.

The Human Services Department letter was sent June 30 to the four insurance companies

that contract with New Mexico to provide health care coverage under Medicaid.

Dr. Chuck Baumgart, chief medical officer of Presbyterian Health Plan, one of the state's Medicaid insurers, said the insurance plans favor the rules change and worked with the state to adopt them.

"It allows an avenue for physicians who want to work with this patient population to be able to do that and get reimbursed for those services," Baumgart said.

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