



## Psychologist Prescribing: Safety, Access, and Cost

### Safety:

- Psychologists point out that other non-physicians can prescribe medications. However, nurse practitioners, physician assistants, and optometrists all have medical training starting at the undergraduate level. Psychologists are largely trained in social sciences and have no baseline medical training. Thus, giving psychologists prescriptive authority is an unprecedented and risky experiment of allowing non-medical professionals to prescribe.
- Despite psychologists having less baseline medical training than any other prescribers, they are not proposing any physician oversight to be able to prescribe. Many prescribers with much more medical training have physician oversight.
- Physicians have 10,000-20,000 hours of medical training. Wisconsin psychologists are proposing for themselves a 450 hour online video course on prescribing. A 450 hour course could never cover the necessary background medical knowledge to be able to prescribe.
- In August 1991, the Department of Defense (“DOD”) began a demonstration pilot training program in which 10 of the best military psychologists were trained and authorized to issue appropriate psychotropic medications under certain circumstances (2 years of classroom training, 1 year of clinical training under close M.D. supervision, an additional year of practice under very close M.D. supervision, patients largely medically healthy, and only limited formulary). Despite all those safeguards, the graduates were found to be performing medically only at the level of 3<sup>rd</sup> year medical students. Wisconsin psychologists assert that this program, which is much more rigorous than what they are proposing for themselves, means that they could prescribe safely. This program cannot be extrapolated to what Wisconsin psychologists are proposing for themselves.
- Primary care physicians will end up needing to “fix” the medical errors made by unqualified prescribers.
- Psychologist prescribing bills have been defeated 87 times in 23 states in the last 15 years, largely because of patient safety concerns.

### Access:

- Wisconsin psychologists say that access to psychiatric care in rural areas would be improved if they could prescribe. However, psychologists are located in the same parts of the state that psychiatrists are, with few psychologists practicing in rural areas.
- In the two states where psychologist prescribing has been legalized, patients do not have better access. For example, only 8 psychologists have prescribing privileges in New Mexico, and all are located in urban areas.
- The needs of under-served areas can best be met by improving the mental health training of general physicians and other medically trained practitioners who are more widely distributed. Wisconsin psychiatrists are currently working on a Wisconsin Consultation Project in which email/phone consultations would be provided to primary care physicians.

### Cost:

- Prescribing psychologists will pay higher liability insurance fees. These higher practice costs will be passed on to patients who will pay higher fees for a lower standard of care.
- Facilities such as hospitals must also cover the increased liability in the event of patients injured by prescribing psychologists, further driving up the cost of medical care.

- A Government Accounting Office Report (1997) concluded that the DOD training program for psychologists to prescribe medication was not adequately justified because the cost of the program was substantial.