
Drugs on the Internet: TRI Training Program for Parents Shows Preliminary Promise

Many parents who receive training will employ strategies for protecting children from rogue Internet pharmacies even if they were not aware of the dangers prior to the training, according to pilot data released by TRI researcher Nicholas Patapis, Psy.D. Patapis' data was collected during pilot testing of "WebSafe Philly," a 90 minute training program that alerts parents to Internet drug pharmacies and includes prevention strategies and tips for intervening when they suspect drug use or problem Internet use by their children.

Thirty three parents from Philadelphia and suburbs participated. In surveys collected prior to the training, participants reported using an average of four prevention strategies for protecting their children from Internet drug sites. Forty-two percent reported that prescription narcotics could not be obtained by children through the Internet.

Following the training, parents reported they would use nine of the prevention strategies suggested in the training with some reporting intention to use all 19. All participants reported they would recommend the program to other parents.

Patapis developed "WebSafe Philly" based on years of research by TRI investigators into Internet pharmacies where prescription drugs are available for no-questions-asked purchase. "Many parents are not aware these pharmacies exist or that they're accessible to even the novice Internet user – including teenagers," Patapis said. "In fact, the sites are no different from conventional drug dealers - they operate on profit motive and care only about ability to pay - not the age of the customer, health status, whether or not there is a doctor's prescription or what a buyer intends to do with the drugs. And most of the drugs they sell are just as addictive and pose the same threat of overdose as street drugs - including heroin," Patapis said.

Originally designed as a Philadelphia-only pilot, news of the training program quickly spread to Philadelphia suburbs, where several parent workshops were eventually scheduled in coordination with local substance abuse treatment and prevention organizations.

Based on the results of the pilot, which was funded by the Pennsylvania Department of Health, Patapis is seeking federal funding for a broader evaluation of the WebSafe model that also measures its long-term effectiveness in preventing children from accessing no-prescription narcotic web sites.