

August 23, 2006

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE



New Report Shows Children's Psychotropic Drug Use Rate Slowing.

Debate continues, Arizona's Medicaid prescribing rate declines 27%.

PHOENIX, AZ— Amidst debate on the growing use of psychotropic medications among children and adolescents, a new report indicates that, among Arizona's Medicaid population at least, the medication use rate is actually declining among children relative to population growth.

According to *Flashpoint: Children, Adolescents and Psychotropic Medications*, a report released today by St. Luke's Health Initiatives (SLHI), enrollment of children ages 0-17 in the Arizona Health Care Cost Containment System (AHCCCS), Arizona's Medicaid program, increased 176 percent between 2002 and 2005, while mental health diagnoses among children increased 185 percent. The number of children who were prescribed psychotropic medications, however, increased 100 percent in the same period, which represents a 27 percent relative decline.

"Use of these medications among children is obviously up, but it's not necessarily the runaway train many people think," said Roger Hughes, SLHI's executive director and the report's principal author. "The controversy over the safety of some of these medications has made some physicians and parents more cautious, and they are not automatically turning to drugs as a first line of defense."

The *Flashpoint* report also points out that one of the reasons the percentage of children enrolled in AHCCCS who receive any mental health diagnosis is lower than estimated national averages – 7.3 percent compared to 10-12 percent nationwide – may be due in part to the large number of Hispanic children in AHCCCS (54 percent). The study underscores the difference in both the prevalence of mental health diagnoses between Whites (11.9 percent) and Hispanics (4.7 percent), and in the percentage of children who are prescribed psychotropic medications (5.7 percent of Whites, 1.4 percent of Hispanics).

"Mental disorders are underdiagnosed and undertreated among Hispanics and other minority populations," Hughes said. "On the other hand, there are major cultural differences in how these disorders are defined and treated in the first place. It's not a black and white issue."

The *Flashpoint* report details the history, efficacy and safety of the use of psychotropic medications among children and adolescents. It also discusses the issues of medicalization – defining what formerly were considered “normal” behaviors in medical terms and using medical interventions to treat them – and the impact of health care reimbursement practices and the growing shortage of psychiatrists and other mental health providers.

“Contrary to conventional wisdom, talk in health care is expensive, not cheap,” Hughes said. “Health plans will pay for the 15-minute med check, but for psychotherapy and other approaches you get limited visits in a different system. It takes time to do a complete differential diagnosis. If all docs do is run patients through the mill and prescribe meds, the medical profession becomes less attractive over time.”

The complete *Flashpoint* report is available from SLHI or can be accessed on the web at http://www.slhi.org/publications/issue_briefs/index.shtml. An extensive annotated bibliography is also available.

The topic of children, adolescents and psychotropic medications will be the focus of a public forum on September 29 from 7:00 a.m. – 9:00 a.m. Space for the panel-audience moderated dialogue is limited. Those interested in attending can register at www.slhi.org.

About SLHI

Established in 1995, St. Luke’s Health Initiatives (SLHI) is a Phoenix-based public foundation focused on Arizona health policy and strength-based community development. For additional information, please visit www.slhi.org.

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