

## Retention and Attrition of Medicare Buprenorphine Prescribers

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### ISSUE

The shortage of clinicians that have received waivers under the Drug Addiction Treatment Act (DATA) of 2000 to provide medication-assisted treatment (MAT) for opioid use disorder is becoming more salient with the ongoing opioid epidemic. While studies have shown a substantial number of DATA-waived physicians never begin prescribing buprenorphine, little is known about how many continue to prescribe buprenorphine once they start. This study provides new insights on retention and attrition of buprenorphine providers.

### METHODS

We constructed a buprenorphine prescriber panel data by combining prescribers who prescribed MAT buprenorphine from the drug level ProPublica Prescriber Checkup (2010-2012) and Medicare Part D Public Use File (PUF) (2013-2017). We identified 6 cohorts of new prescribers in each year starting 2012 by excluding prescribers who prescribed buprenorphine in prior years. We then merged the prescriber panel data with AMA Masterfile (2016) using National Provider Identifier for additional prescriber characteristics, including specialty, age, and length of time since completing residency training. We presented the trends in the total number of prescribers and analyzed the retention over time by the year they started to prescribe MAT buprenorphine. We then ran prescriber random-effect panel regressions on probability of prescribing MAT buprenorphine using years since first prescribing MAT buprenorphine.

### FINDINGS

A total of 6,971 physicians began prescribing buprenorphine between 2012 and 2017; yet, there was only a net increase of 2,705 providers during that interval due to high attrition rates across all cohorts (Figure 1). When adjusting for other provider characteristics, high attrition rates hold. Prescribers are 24% less likely to prescribe in year two, falling to 39% less likely to prescribe by year six. (Table 1) Prescribers whose initial buprenorphine panel size is more than 10 Medicare beneficiaries are 14% more likely to continue prescribing.

### DISCUSSION

The results of this study suggest significant attrition in MAT buprenorphine prescribers for Medicare beneficiaries. Given that many DATA waived physicians do not even begin prescribing, it is important to identify policies and programs that encourage those who started prescribing to stay active.

**Key Words:** Opioids, buprenorphine, prescribers, attrition, Medicare