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## New pads are prescription for fighting forgeries

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The signature of Dr. Glennell Smith isn't making its way around town as much as it once did. And that's a good thing.

Smith, an internist/endocrinologist for the last 28 years, works out of his Grant Street office. He said at least once a year over the last four years, he had been the victim of prescription forgeries for drugs on New York State's list of controlled substances. One clever forger even tried passing a note on one of Smith's prescription blanks to his boss, explaining he needed time off from work.

But ever since New York State rolled out its new Official Prescription Program as an amendment to the Public Health Law on April 19, 2006, forgeries from Smith's office are a thing of the past.

"Since the new blanks came out, it hasn't been an issue at all," he said.

For years, the New York State Bureau of Narcotic Enforcement has been looking to crack down on fraudulent prescriptions, keep prescription blanks out of the hands of those looking to pass fake prescriptions, and reduce the amount of medications obtained through fraudulent means.

Jeffrey Hammond, spokesperson for the New York State Department of Health, said the official prescription program was put into place to accomplish just that.

"We used to see more altered prescription blanks, not necessarily forgeries," said Martin Pietruszewski, who owns Kenmore Prescription Center. Prior to the new blanks coming out, he said, "People would try adding a zero at the end of a prescribed quantity, or a one in front, to try to increase the amount (of a drug to be dispensed)."

Pietruszewski said another popular tactic used by counterfeiters was to treat the prescription blank with a solvent to remove pen ink, then write in the drug and dosing information. Others simply photocopied a blank prescription, and wrote the prescription themselves.



Pharmacist Bill Barclay knows the need for features that make it difficult to forge a prescription.

"Some forgeries were better than others," said Bill Barclay, a pharmacist, Pietruszewski's business partner and operator of Washington Pharmacy in Buffalo.

Barclay had been on the receiving end of Smith's forged prescriptions, which were for popular controlled substances: painkillers including Soma, Tylenol or Hydrocodone. But prior to last April, keen-eyed pharmacists could tell a bad script from the way a drug is dosed, or small details like the missing glue strip from along the top of the tear-off prescription pad.

The new Official Prescription Program appears to be working, as the diversion of prescription controlled substances - such as those listed by Smith, and others prone to abuse - has been curtailed.

"In just one month, for example, the Official Prescription Program saved the Medicaid program an estimated \$18 million," said Hammond. "The official forms decrease costs to Medicaid by reducing fraudulent prescription claims."

Hammond added there's been a 7 percent

reduction in the amount of Hydrocodone, a painkiller also known as Lortab or Vicodin, from the first half of 2006 when compared to the first half of 2007.

"Any level of security that's been added to prevent diversion is a great thing, but unfortunately the criminals always seem to be one step ahead," said Barclay.

"A secretary or nurse will call us, saying one of their prescription pads are missing," said Pietruszewski, who uses Health Provider Network, a state Web site, to check serial numbers for complete ranges of serial numbers reported missing.

"The ranges of stolen serial numbers are there," said Pietruszewski, adding the extra security measures add time to his internal processes. "But it's difficult to navigate."

Additionally, many workstations at other pharmacies aren't equipped with full Internet access. And some pharmacists often don't have the time to talk on the phone during the workday or take lunch breaks.

Barclay, as an example, was contacted four times to be interviewed for this article before

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he was able to break away for a few seconds to ask the person who answered the phone at his store to schedule it for early morning Aug. 10, before the store opened.

The state's blanks are printed at Standard Register, a Dayton, Ohio-based firm that earned a two-year contract from the state for the project. The blanks are paid for by the state, and sent to physicians and providers free of charge.

To date, Hammond said, 240 million blanks have been delivered to more than 97,000 registered practitioners and 2,100 registered health care facilities. Approximately 750,000 prescriptions are written on them annually.

The next phase of prescription writing will be pure electronic-based, where actual pieces of paper could be eliminated entirely from the process. But creating a super-secure system with protected health information, and HIPAA considerations will prevent doing so from becoming a slam-dunk.

"There's a trend toward increased electronic prescribing, and the Department of Health and the state have recognized this," said Hammond. "To allow this, the federal government is still working on regulations for electronic prescribing. Once all these regulations are developed, we'll be ready to implement the program."

It's been awhile since Smith has had a prescription forged. And even though the new system seems to be working, he's not taking any chances. He's made his own provisions to ensure it doesn't happen again. He keeps a healthy supply of prescription blanks in his lab coat pocket during the day.

As for the remaining pads he ordered from the state?

"I keep them under lock and key," he said.

## Doctor's orders: Fraud-fighting features

The official state prescription blanks have a variety of unique security features, which have been used to combat fraud and counterfeiting.

### 1 Anti-copying feature:

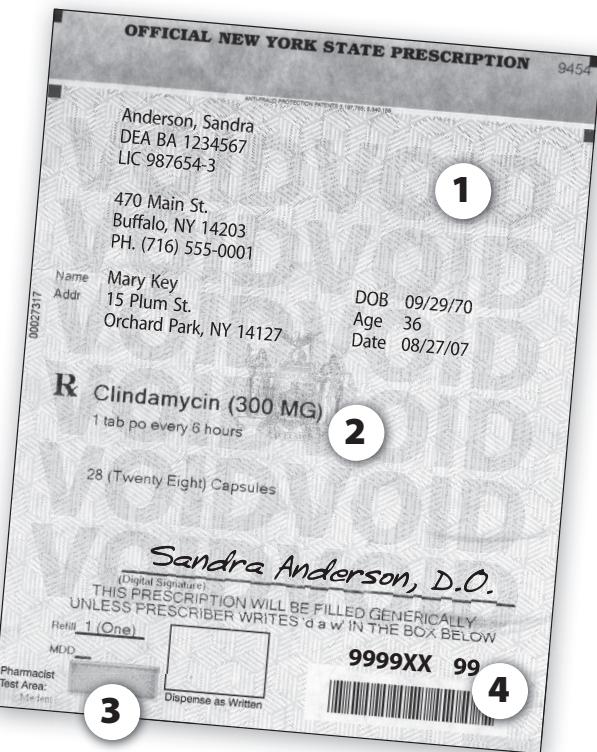
The blanks cannot be scanned or photocopied. If they are, the word "void" appears throughout the background of the copied version.

### 2 State seal and watermark:

Multiple hexagons and state seal create the background, and are part of the anti-copying features.

### 3 Pharmacist test

**area:** Placing the thumb or finger on this blue rectangular area turns the box white.



"If the color doesn't change, it's a fraudulent prescription," said Jeffrey Hammond, spokesperson for the New York State Department of Health.

**4 Serial number and bar code:** Allows scripts to be tracked from the vendor to the practitioner to the pharmacy.

"We always know where a prescription is going," said Hammond. Lost or stolen serial numbers are posted to [www.nyhealth.gov](http://www.nyhealth.gov), where the DOH tracks illegal activity and fraudulent prescriptions.

"We also use this for patients who go to multiple doctors to try to get more of the same narcotic," said Hammond.

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