Prescribed Alcohol Clarification of Rules by the State

Summary

A physician may prescribe and/or administer liquor to a patient. A pharmacy may store and dispense alcohol, like any other legend drug to a patient. A hospital may administer liquor to any patient for medicinal purposes.

Can alcohol be prescribed by physicians to be used for legitimate medical purposes?

Physicians are allowed to prescribe drugs. RCW 18.71.011 (2). In the statutory definition of the practice of pharmacy is the “dispensing, labeling, administering, and distributing of drugs. . .”. RCW 18.64.011 (23). “Legend Drug” is defined as a substance used either as affecting the structure or any function of the human body or in diagnosing, curing, mitigating, treating, or preventing a disease. RCW 69.41.010.

It is standard practice when treating cases of severe alcoholism with delirium tremens for institutional pharmacies to dispense (by prescription) one ounce aliquots of vodka or some other liquor so that the patient may be gradually detoxified.

So, the law relating specifically to providers and pharmacies, while not specifically mentioning alcohol or liquor, does appear to allow for this practice.

Must physicians and hospitals hold special permits issued by the Liquor Control Board in addition to their DOH licenses?

While liquor can be considered a drug as it is used in detoxification from alcohol under pharmacy laws, there are, other laws in Washington that regulate alcohol prescribed and dispensed for medical use. These laws are found in the laws establishing the Liquor Control Board[1].

A physician may prescribe and/or administer liquor to the patient for medical reasons. RCW 66.20.100. A hospital is legally authorized to distribute, dispense, conduct research with respect to, or to administer alcohol so long as it is issued for a legitimate medical purpose to a patient by one authorized to prescribe the use of legend drugs. RCW 66.20.120.

The provisions in the Liquor Control statutes mentioned above also require hospitals and physicians to have special permits issued by the Liquor Control Board. A search of the Liquor Control Board website reveals current application forms for these “special permits.” [http://www.liq.wa.gov/publications/LIQ%20Class%20Permit.pdf](http://www.liq.wa.gov/publications/LIQ%20Class%20Permit.pdf). The permit required is a “Class 1 special permit” and costs $5.

Conclusion
It appears fairly clear that alcohol may be prescribed and dispensed for legitimate medical reasons. However, there is a statutory requirement that the physician or hospital have a special permit issued by the Liquor Control Board.

**Relevant statutes set out in full**

**RCW 18.64.011 Definitions.**

Unless the context clearly requires otherwise, definitions of terms shall be as indicated when used in this chapter.

(23) "Practice of pharmacy" includes the practice of and responsibility for: Interpreting prescription orders; the compounding, dispensing, labeling, administering, and distributing of drugs and devices; the monitoring of drug therapy and use; the initiating or modifying of drug therapy in accordance with written guidelines or protocols previously established and approved for his or her practice by a practitioner authorized to prescribe drugs; the participating in drug utilization reviews and drug product selection; the proper and safe storing and distributing of drugs and devices and maintenance of proper records thereof; the providing of information on legend drugs which may include, but is not limited to, the advising of therapeutic values, hazards, and the uses of drugs and devices.

**RCW 66.20.100 Physician may prescribe or administer liquor -- Penalty.**

Any physician who deems liquor necessary for the health of a patient, whether an interdicted person or not, whom he has seen or visited professionally may give to the patient a prescription therefor, signed by the physician, or the physician may administer the liquor to the patient, for which purpose the physician may administer the liquor purchased by him under special permit and may charge for the liquor so administered; but no prescription shall be given or liquor be administered by a physician except to bona fide patients in cases of actual need, and when in the judgment of the physician the use of liquor as medicine in the quantity prescribed or administered is necessary; and any physician who administers liquor in evasion or violation of this title shall be guilty of a violation of this title. (emphasis added).

**RCW 66.20.120 Hospital, etc., may administer liquor — Penalty.**

Any person in charge of an institution regularly conducted as a hospital or sanatorium for the care of persons in ill health, or as a home devoted exclusively to the care of aged people, may, if he holds a special permit under this title for that purpose, administer liquor purchased by him under his special permit to any patient or inmate of the institution who is in need of the same, either by way of external application or otherwise for medicinal purposes, and may charge for the liquor so administered; but no liquor shall be administered by any person under this section except to bona fide patients or inmates of the institution of which he is in charge and in cases of actual need and every person in charge of an institution who administers liquor in evasion or violation of this title shall be guilty of a violation of this title. (emphasis added).