

Feds tell clinic to shape up or close

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The federal government threatened to close down Beth Israel Medical Center's methadone clinic in Stapleton yesterday following an undercover probe that found patients were selling the drug for profit outside the clinic.

Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) officials charged that the clinic for heroin addicts at 111 Water St. was improperly dispensing methadone and permitting a methadone-for-profit scam to thrive. DEA officials hand-delivered a "show cause" order to the methadone treatment center yesterday morning.

It is the first time federal drug agents have taken action against one of Beth Israel Medical Center's 23 clinics throughout New York City during the program's 25-year existence, a spokeswoman said.

Bronx clinic also named

The DEA also filed charges against a methadone clinic run by Montefiore Hospital in the Bronx for the same violations, said Mark Hannan, a spokesman for the agency.

"We have information that the clinic is operating improperly in dispensing methadone. Some of the patients are selling methadone outside the clinic. We have made purchases of methadone outside the clinic from the patients," Hannan said, referring to DEA undercover investigators.

Since federal and state rules require clinics to provide regular urine testing to determine if patients are taking the methadone or other drugs, officials at the Staten Island clinic should have been aware of the problem, Hannan said.

"The methadone being dispensed, in some cases, is not being taken by heroin addicts. The information we received is that some of the patients are not testing positive for methadone. If he is not taking it, he is selling it," he added.

Beth Israel has 30 days to respond to the charges or face closure. "It is incumbent upon the clinic to show why they should remain open and continue to dispense methadone following the allegations we make," Hannan said during a telephone interview.

The DEA enforces federal drug laws in conjunction with the U.S. Food and Drug Administration. The undercover DEA methadone probe started in late 1989, Hannan said.

The Advance first learned of the action through tips from state sources. All methadone clinics are licensed by the state Division of Substance Abuse Services (DSAS). But state officials had no role in the methadone probe, Hannan said.

Salvatore Cincotta, clinic supervisor of the Island methadone program, declined comment and referred a reporter's questions to Beth Israel officials in Manhattan headquarters. "I'm not at liberty to discuss it," he said.

Karen Ziperin, a spokeswoman for Beth Israel, said the federal action against its Island facility is the first time any of its 23 methadone clinics have been threatened with closure for violations. Beth Israel operates one of the largest methadone treatment programs in the country, treating 8,000 heroin addicts a year. The agency is reviewing the charges, she said.

Dr. Robert G. Newman, president of Beth Israel Medical Center, addressed the charges in a prepared statement. "Obviously, in any program there will be deficiencies, and we have always been and continue to be committed to correcting them and enhancing

further the services we provide," he said.

Newman defended methadone treatment at Beth Israel. The drug is proven to block an addict's craving for heroin. He pointed to a federal survey showing that "95 to 98 percent" of the patients enrolled in New York City methadone programs stopped using heroin within six months of treatment.

"We share with the DEA and law enforcement agencies the desire to see the illicit market in methadone eliminated," he said, "but we believe this cannot be achieved as long as lifesaving treatment is denied to those who need it."

Newman said it was inconceivable to close down the Stapleton clinic that treats several hundred heroin addicts during the week. Such action would only worsen the plight of heroin addicts, who are denied treatment because existing methadone programs are already filled, he added.

But the DEA's Hannan said Beth Israel should concentrate on removing addicts who abuse the program by operating a methadone-for-profit scam. "There are other heroin addicts waiting to join the program. This (methadone scam) is tying up the system," he said.

The Island clinic will remain open pending a hearing on the charges. The state plans to do follow-up inspections, said Louis Ganim, a spokesman for DSAS. While not involved in the recent DEA probe, he noted DSAS conducted six unannounced inspections at six other methadone facilities in the city last month.

"There's clearly a problem with methadone being diverted. We have recognized that," Ganim said.

DSAS is trying to cut down the methadone abuses without scrapping the program entirely. Neighbors over the years have frequently complained about loitering at the Stapleton clinic.