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#### Published In/Presented At

Bermudez, M. Griffiths, C. Martin, S. (2017, August 25). *Recognizing Symptoms of Withdrawal Through Implementation of the COWS Scale in Adult Acute Care Settings*. Poster presented at: LVHN Vizient/AACN Nurse Residency Program Graduation, Lehigh Valley Health Network, Allentown, PA.

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# Recognizing Symptoms of Withdrawal Through Implementation of the COWS Scale in Adult Acute Care Settings

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## Background/ Purpose

- Approximately 3.5 million people are dependent on illicit drugs, including stimulants and heroin (Costello, 2016).
- Withdrawal symptoms can begin early during hospitalization and can last up to one week (Opiate withdrawal Timelines, Symptoms and Treatment).
- Currently at LVHN patients are screened on admission for current street drug/inhalant/medication abuse. There is no current process for when patients answer yes to the screening.
- When a patient is ordered a Rapid Urine Drugs Screens (RUDS) and tests positive for illicit substances, there is no current process for withdrawal screenings.
- A pre-survey completed by the nurses on 4K and TTU showed 45.8% (11 out of 24 nurses) selected that they “always” screen their patients for opiate abuse. In addition, 41.7% (10 out of 24 nurses) selected that they are “somewhat comfortable” with their ability to recognize when a patient is going through withdrawal from opiates.
- There is currently no validated screening tool at LVHN that screens for opiate withdrawal.

## PICO

- In adult acute medical-surgical patients who answer positively to the current use of street drug/inhalant/medication abuse and/or screens positively on a rapid urine drug screen (RUDS) for opiates on admission, does a validated screening tool versus no screening tool, help to recognize symptoms of withdrawal?

## Methodology

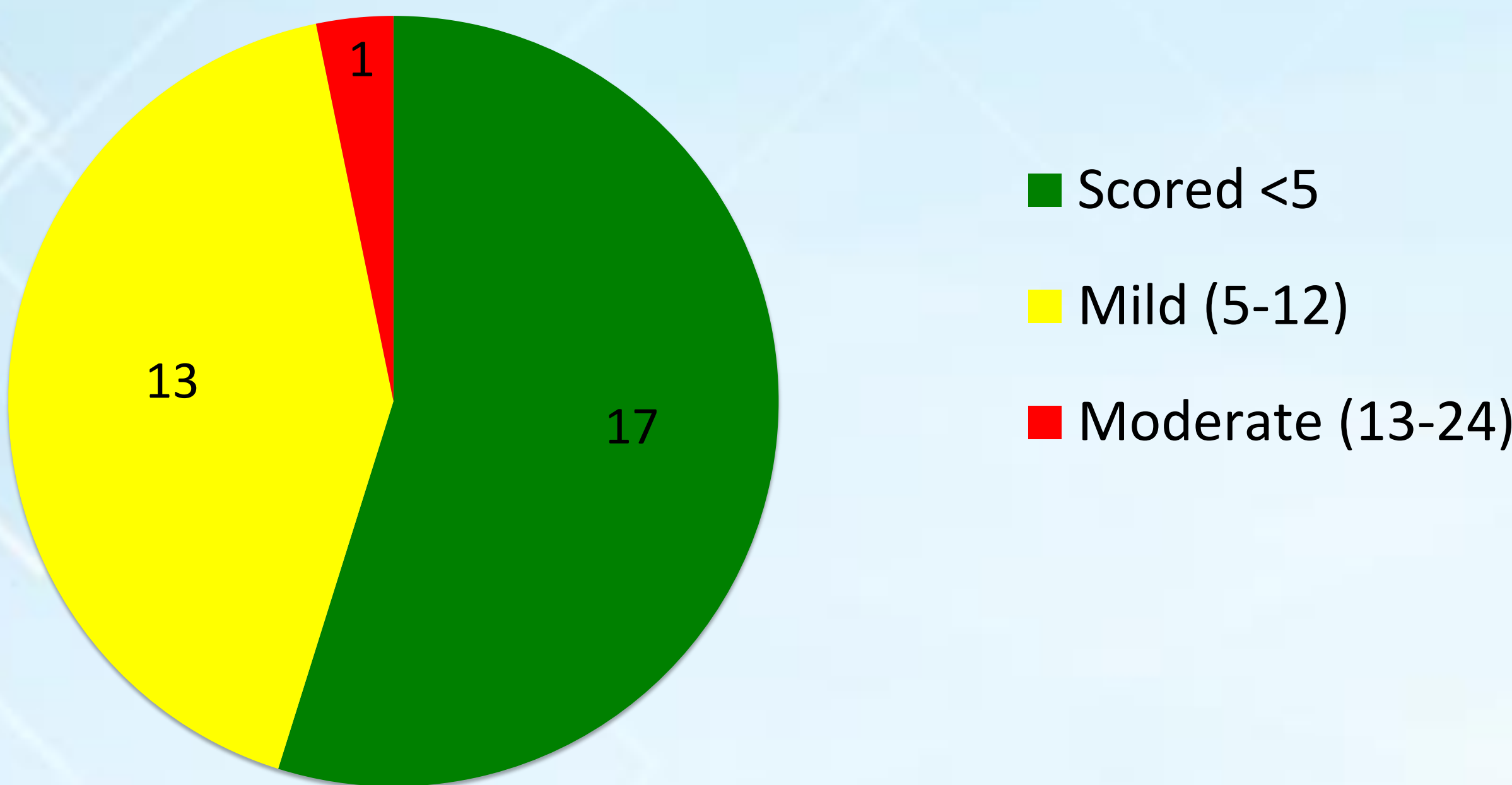
- A pre-survey was distributed to nurses on units 4K and TTU asking questions related to screening for substance abuse, their assessments for withdrawal, and management of withdrawal Responses included 24 nurses.
- 59 nurses on 4K and TTU were educated on opiate withdrawal symptoms and the use of the COWS scale through an educational PowerPoint, unit meetings, and safety huddles.
- Screening for opiate withdrawal was implemented by the nursing staff on both units using the Clinical Opiate Withdrawal Scale (COWS) over a two month period of time.
- Screening includes patients that answer positively to substance abuse screenings on admission or test positive for opiates on a Rapid Urine Drug Screening (RUDS).
- The screening is completed **every 4 hours** by nursing staff on the paper worksheet kept on the unit.
- Nurses were provided with a post-survey that had similar questions to the pre-survey that totaled 15 responses to identify if the COWS scale heightened their awareness of withdrawal symptoms.

## Evidence

- Clinical Opiate Withdrawal Scale (COWS), Clinical Institute Narcotic Assessment Scale (CINA), and Visual Analog Scale (VAS) are all valid measurement tools for acute opiate withdrawal (Tompkins, 2009).
- It is important to screen for withdrawal in the hospital setting because the first symptoms begin to develop twelve hours after the last dose. More symptoms develop after the first day and only start subsiding 4-10 days later (Withdrawal Management, 1970).
- Nurses understanding of opiates improves post opioid education, which can also help improve patient knowledge related to opioids (Costello, 2016).
- Screening for substance abuse is an important way to distinguish between those who may benefit from minimal interventions and other individuals who may require further assessment and treatment (Babor, 2005).
- Urine testing is the preferred specimen for identifying the presence of drugs in the body, as it is relatively non-invasive and cost effective (Heit, 2004).

## Outcome/Results

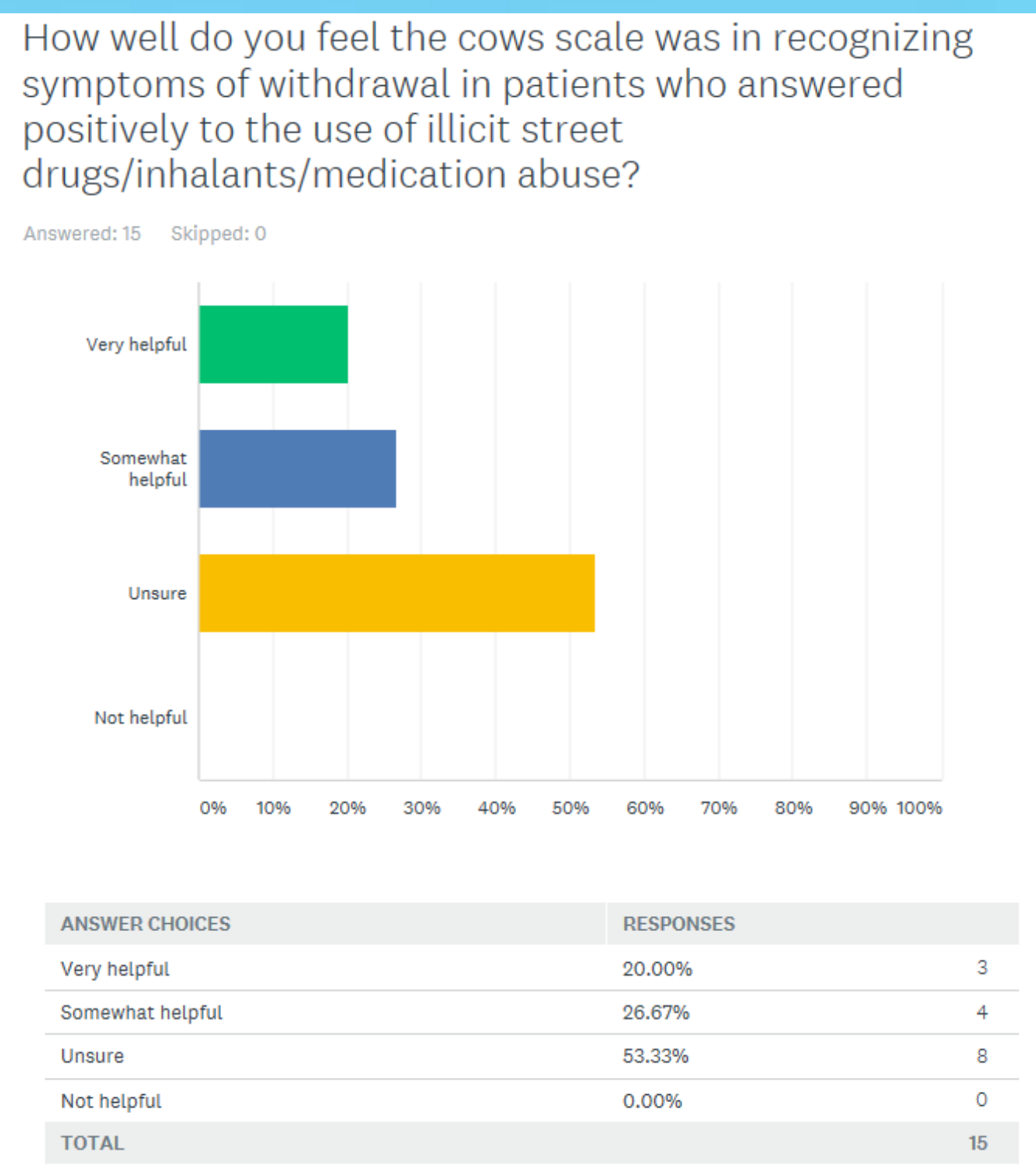
31 COWS Scale Assessment Scores from 14 patients



14 out of the 31 (45%) assessments identified the patient was experiencing mild to moderate withdrawal symptoms.

## Outcome/Results

### Post-Education Nurse Survey Results



## Conclusions

Utilization of the COWS Scale improved registered nurses’ identification of withdrawal symptoms in patients who answered positively to the use of street drugs/ inhalants/ medication abuse and whose RUDS screening was positive.

## Next Steps

- Create a Network wide policy on screening for opiate withdrawal using the COWS, and a policy on treatment of opiate withdrawal.

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