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Minnesota medical board vote protects doctors who prescribe controversial Lyme disease treatment

Vote protects doctors who prescribe controversial therapy

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Doctors who prescribe long-term antibiotic therapy for Lyme disease will not face discipline from Minnesota's licensing board unless patients complain the therapy harmed them.

The Minnesota Board of Medical Practice's 8-6 decision this month drew praise from advocates, who say the threat of discipline discouraged doctors from treating chronic Lyme disease with antibiotics.

"We have to get more doctors to fight this growing epidemic of tick-borne illness," said Jan Thietje, an outreach coordinator for the Minnesota Lyme Action Support Group.

The board agreement will last five years or until medical research resolves whether long-term antibiotic therapy is effective and whether Lyme can even reach a chronic phase.

While medical boards in other states have

disciplined doctors for providing long-term antibiotic therapy, Minnesota's board has never disciplined or even investigated doctors solely on that basis. The issue is nonetheless important in Minnesota, because the state has one of the highest rates of the tick-borne disease in the nation.

The administrative decision heads off legislation that had been discussed by state House and Senate committees. Some members of the medical board weren't in favor of the policy but said it was better than legislation that could set a legal precedent, said Robert Leach, executive director of the board.

Sen. John Marty, DFL-Roseville, said he was pleased by the board's decision, which buys time to settle the "honest disagreement" among doctors over Lyme disease and its treatment options.

Concerns about long-term therapy include side effects and overuse that can make bacteria resistant to antibiotics.

Standard therapy is a short-term course of antibiotics for Lyme, which initially causes fever, fatigue and a characteristic bull's-eye rash. Over time, it can cause joint pain and disruptions to the heart and central nervous system.

Several patients offered emotional testimony at legislative hearings, noting how their symptoms lingered for years until they received long-term treatment.

The board reached its decision March 13 and posted it on its Web site late last week.

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