



Safe Prescribing of Opioids for Pain, and Reduction of Opioid Misuse Eblast Series

E-blast No. 1 – What is the role of medical professionals in reducing opioid misuse?

Every day, medical professionals care for patients who suffer from pain. Pain is among the most prevalent and debilitating medical conditions; it is also among the most complex to manage. Unmanaged or inappropriately treated pain compromises patients' quality of life, and increases their use of health care services (SAMHSA, 2016). Patients with addictions or in recovery deserve to have their pain treated effectively and safely; however, their pain oftentimes poses a challenge for many medical professionals (SAMHSA, 2016).

Opioid analgesics are most commonly prescribed for the 30 percent of Americans who experience acute or chronic pain (AAPM, 2013). The urgency of patients' needs and the effectiveness of opioids have combined to produce an over-reliance on opioid medications in the United States. In turn, this trend has been associated with alarming increases in diversion, overdose, and addiction, leading to a national epidemic of opioid overdose deaths and addictions (Volkow and McClellan, 2016).

The National Survey on Drug Use and Health (administered by SAMHSA) revealed that from 2004 to 2008, emergency department visits involving non-medical opioid use increased by 111 percent. The most common sources of misused prescription opioids were friends or relatives (whether for free or purchased), or left over from their own prescription provided for a legitimate medical problem (SAMHSA, NSDUH, 2011).

All medical professionals (including **physicians, dentists, nurses and pharmacists**) can play a key role in preventing the diversion, misuse and abuse of prescription opioids:

- **Physicians**, as well as Advanced Registered Nurse Practitioners (ARNP) and Physician Assistants (PA), have an obligation to provide pain relief, while also balancing safety and efficacy. According to the CDC, one in four persons receiving long-term opioids in primary care settings struggle with addiction. Determining whether, when and how to prescribe opioid analgesics for chronic pain; detecting misuse or emerging addiction; and discussing these issues with patients and family members are critical to minimizing public health risks (CDC, 2017).
- **Nurses** are critical for advocating for safe pain management across all treatment settings for patients, and for ensuring that patients with substance use disorders and pain are treated with the same quality of pain management as all other patients (Oliver et al, 2012). Nurses are key to the assessment of patients, coordination of care, and education and counseling -- all of which reduce the potential for harm (Pasero et al, 2016).



- **Dentists** also play a key role in mitigating opioid misuse and preventing addiction. In 2009, dentists prescribed 8 percent (or 6.4 million prescriptions) of opioid analgesics in the United States. The most common cause of prescriptions for opioids is molar removal -- providing short-term prescriptions for removal prevents patients from having leftover medication (Denisco et al, 2011). Being mindful of the rise in the misuse of medication and using prescription monitoring programs can prevent misuse (ADA, 2017).
- **Pharmacists** are the public's most accessible medication safety experts. They have extensive knowledge about prescription opioid medications (e.g., indication, mechanism of action, dosage, adverse drug reactions and drug interactions) and thus, are ideally situated to decrease opioid overdose deaths through education and monitoring. Pharmacists can review the profile of patients to determine those who are chronically taking controlled substances, note misuse, identify forged prescriptions, and take appropriate steps to correct it (Cochran, 2015). Pharmacists can also play an active role in treating and preventing substance abuse by making recommendations to the prescriber when appropriate (CDC, 2017).



All prescribers, nurses and pharmacists can assure that all persons receive adequate and safe pain relief, and can minimize the potential for drug misuse and diversion by:

- Assessing patients for potential risks of misuse and addiction
- Learning best practices for prescribing opioids and monitoring use
- Educating patients about the benefits and risks of opioid medication, warning signs of addiction, and proper storage and disposal of medications
- Coordinating care for persons suffering from chronic pain
- Developing referral resources for substance abuse treatment when indicated

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