



Public Policy Statement on the Rights and Responsibilities of Healthcare Professionals in the use of Opioids for the Treatment of Pain

A consensus document from the American Academy of Pain Medicine, the American Pain Society, and the American Society of Addiction Medicine.

BACKGROUND

Healthcare professional (HCP) concerns regarding the potential for harm to patients, as well as possible legal, regulatory, licensing or other third party sanctions related to the prescription of opioids, contribute significantly to the mistreatment of pain. HCPs are obligated to act in the best interest of their patients. This action may include the addition of opioid medication to the treatment plan of patients whose symptoms include pain. Though many types of pain are best addressed by non-opioid interventions, opioids are often indicated as a component of effective pain treatment. It is sometimes a difficult medical judgment as to whether opioid therapy is indicated in patients complaining of pain because objective signs are not always present.

A decision whether to prescribe opioids may be particularly difficult in patients with concurrent addictive disorders, or with risk factors for addiction, such as a personal or family history of addictive disorder. For such persons, exposure to potentially rewarding substances may reinforce drug taking behavior and therefore present special risks. It is, nonetheless, a medical judgment that must be made by a HCP in the context of the provider-patient relationship based on knowledge of the patient, awareness of the patient's medical and psychiatric conditions and on observation of the patient's response to treatment. The selection of a particular opioid, or combination of opioids, and the determination of opioid dose and therapeutic schedule similarly must be based on full clinical understanding of a particular situation and cannot be judged appropriate or inappropriate independent of such knowledge. All schedule II-V opioids, including methadone, may be appropriate choices for pain control in different circumstances; it is critical that clinicians understand the special pharmacologic characteristics of each medication in order to prescribe them safely and effectively for pain.

Despite appropriate medical practice, healthcare providers who prescribe opioids for pain may occasionally be misled by patients who wish to obtain medications for purposes other than pain treatment, such as diversion for profit, recreational use or perpetuation of an addicted state. Physicians who are willing to provide compassionate, ongoing medical care to challenging and psychosocially stressed patients, where that treatment includes the prescription of opioids, assume an additional obligation to understand the risks and management of addictive disease because they risk complications of care more often than physicians unwilling to treat this population.

Addiction to opioids may occur despite appropriate opioid therapy for pain in some susceptible individuals. Persistent failure to recognize and provide appropriate medical treatment for the disease of addiction is poor medical practice and may become grounds for practice concern. Similarly, persistent failure to use opioids effectively when they are indicated as part of the treatment of pain, including in persons with active or recovering addiction, is poor medical practice and may also become grounds for practice concern. It is important to distinguish, however, between HCPs who are knowingly complicit in diversion or other illegal prescribing activities and physicians who may inappropriately prescribe opioids due to misunderstandings regarding addiction or pain. HCPs traditionally have received little or no education on addiction or clinical pain treatment in the course of training. This omission is likely a basis for inadequate detection and management of addiction and inadequate assessment and treatment of pain.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Healthcare professionals (HCPs) who prescribe opioids for the treatment of pain should use clear and reasonable medical judgment to establish that a pain state exists and to determine whether opioids are an indicated component of treatment. Opioids should be prescribed in a lawful and clinically sound manner. Patients should be followed at reasonable intervals for ongoing medical management, to confirm as nearly as is reasonable that the medications are used as prescribed, that the goals of treatment are met and to revise therapy as indicated. Such initial decision-making and ongoing management should be appropriately documented.
2. HCPs who are practicing medicine in good faith and who use reasonable medical judgment regarding the prescription of opioids for the treatment of pain should not be held responsible for the willful and deceptive behavior of patients who successfully obtain opioids for non-medical purposes. It is an appropriate role of the DEA, pharmacy boards and other regulatory agencies to inform physicians of the behavior of such patients when it is detected.
3. Interventions to correct the clinical care practices of HCPs who consistently fail to recognize addictive disorders, medication misuse, or medication diversion in their patients are appropriate. Interventions may include education and/or licensing or legal sanction as indicated after careful and appropriate review of records and other available information.
4. Interventions to correct the clinical care practices of HCPs who consistently fail to appropriately evaluate and treat pain in their patients are appropriate. Interventions may include education and/or licensing or legal sanction as indicated after careful and appropriate review of records and other available information.
5. For the purpose of performing regulatory, legal, quality assurance and other clinical case reviews, it should be recognized that judgment regarding a) the medical appropriateness of the prescription of opioids for pain in a specific context, b) the selection of a particular opioid drug or drugs, and c) the determination of indicated opioid dosage and interval of medication administration, can only be made properly with full and detailed understanding of a particular clinical case.
6. Regulatory, legal, quality assurance and other reviews of clinical cases involving the use of opioids for the treatment of pain should be performed, when they are indicated, by reviewers with a requisite level of understanding of pain medicine and addiction medicine.
7. Appropriate education in addiction medicine and pain medicine should be provided as part of the core curriculum at all medical and other provider training schools.
8. Legal and/or licensing actions against HCPs who are proven to be knowingly complicit in the diversion of scheduled drugs or other illegal prescribing activities are appropriate.

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