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American Academy of Pain Medicine Statement on Appropriate Use of Opioids

Glenview, IL - October 14, 2003 – Misinformation and exaggerated and unfounded fears of addiction deter the millions of Americans who suffer from acute and chronic pain from seeking appropriate relief.

Medical experts from the American Academy of Pain Medicine are available to speak with journalists seeking information about the risk of addiction from pain medication.

Persistent pain is a complex medical problem. Proper treatment requires comprehensive evaluation and may involve a wide range of management approaches including medications and non-pharmacological strategies. Appropriate use of opioids (sometimes called narcotic analgesics) under medical supervision is a common and effective method of treatment for persistent pain. Major pain management advocacy organizations, including the American Academy of Pain Medicine (AAPM) and the American Pain Society, have endorsed opioids, when used in an appropriate manner, for the treatment of chronic pain.

Long term use of opioids results in physical dependence, which is different from addiction, but does not usually lead to addiction. Addiction is a distinct medical condition with genetic, psychosocial, and environmental factors influencing its development and manifestation. It is characterized by impaired control over drug use, compulsive use, and continued use despite harm and decreased quality of life.

Physical dependence is a normal adaptive state, the expected result of using pain medicines (as well as other medications) for a long time. One who is physically dependent on pain medicine will experience withdrawal symptoms when the medicine is markedly decreased, stopped or reversed. No withdrawal symptoms are anticipated if the medications are decreased, tapered, or stopped gradually, under medical supervision.

The inappropriate use of opioids to sustain the needs of addiction results in decreased function and should not be condoned. The appropriate use of opioids for the management of pain under medical supervision results in improved function and should be encouraged.

A consensus statement from AAPM and the American Pain Society (APS) that provides information and guidelines about the use of opioids for chronic pain and a joint consensus statement from AAPM, APS and the American Society of Addiction Medicine (ASAM) about the definition of addiction, physical dependency and tolerance can be found on the AAPM Web site at www.painmed.org.