

MEDIA RELEASE

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Opioid treatment of ongoing pain not wise

“Opioids are being widely used to treat chronic non-cancer pain in Australia despite evidence of their ineffectiveness for long-term pain, and we need to offer people better treatment options,” says Painaustralia CEO Carol Bennett.

Speaking during #BeMedicinewise week, which is focusing on the theme ‘medicines misuse can happen to anyone’, Ms Bennett says, ***“Unfortunately, many consumers believe opioids are of benefit for their chronic pain and they find it difficult to reduce their use. We need to ensure better awareness and provide more effective support to people with chronic pain if we are to reduce misuse of opioid medication in Australia. Dependence and unwanted side-effects can have a devastating impact on people’s lives.”***

Ms Bennett emphasised that simply telling people to stop using opioids is not enough. ***“While we need to create greater awareness of appropriate use of opioids and risks associated with misuse, we also need sound alternative treatments and supports for people experiencing chronic pain including:***

- ***improved access (especially in rural and regional areas) and reduced waiting times for specialist pain services;***
- ***a health workforce trained to assist people in pain;***
- ***clear pathways for referral utilising a team-based approach in the primary health care setting as much as possible; and***
- ***availability of affordable allied health services.***

A public awareness and education campaign will ensure that the community understands best-practice management of chronic pain and when avoiding opioids is in their best interest. This will have far-reaching benefits for individuals and families, the Australian community and our economy.”

Opioids can be effectively used to treat acute or cancer pain, but there is increasing evidence that they are being over-prescribed for people experiencing chronic pain of an ongoing nature. Governments around the world are looking at ways to minimise access to opioids.

In Australia, the establishment of a national real-time monitoring system will provide a real opportunity to identify those at risk of dependence and enable better support to be provided.

The latest general practice data shows that an opioid was prescribed in almost three in four (72.7%) occasions of general multisite pain management. Between 1992 and 2012, opioid dispensing increased 15-fold (500,000 to 7.5 million) and the corresponding cost to the Australian Government increased 32-fold (\$8.5 million to \$271 million), while opioid-related harms, hospitalisations and accidental deaths also increased.

One in 10 Australians aged over 14 has misused prescription pain-relievers or opioid medicines, possibly unaware that mixing painkillers with alcohol or other drugs can have unpredictable results and cause accidental death.

“Although chronic pain is difficult to treat and may be lifelong, evidence shows that multidisciplinary pain management is the most effective approach for minimising the impact of pain, improving function and quality of life, and avoiding or minimising reliance on painkillers. There are no simple fixes for a complex problem,” Ms Bennett said.

Painaustralia has partnered with NPS Medicinewise for #BeMedicinewise week.