

## **No quick fix for rising opioid harms**

The release today of the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) report, '*Opioid harm in Australia: and comparisons between Australia and Canada*' paints a bleak picture of rising dependence, accidental overdose, hospitalisations and death among those using opioids like oxycodone, codeine and morphine.

### Key findings from the Report:

- 3.1 million people were prescribed 15.4 opioid scripts in 2016–17
- Opioids accounted for 62% of drug-induced deaths and rose by 62% from 2007 to 2016
- Pharmaceutical opioids were more likely than heroin to be involved in opioid deaths and hospitalisations
- In 2016–17 there were 5,112 emergency department presentations and 9,636 hospitalisations due to opioid poisoning
- Every day in Australia, 3 people die

"These findings are not just about medication, but shine a light on Australians fighting what it often an invisible illness – pain," according to Painaustralia CEO, Carol Bennett.

"Australia is facing a pain epidemic. Pain is the major reason people go to the doctor, and it is the main reason opioids are prescribed. It is one of the leading causes of disability, absenteeism and forced early retirement in Australia.

"We know opioids can be a useful medication for managing short-term, acute pain. The problem is they're often treated as the first and only line of defence for managing *all* pain conditions, including chronic pain.

"In the long run, opioid use leads to rising tolerance and dependence, as well as actually making the body more sensitive to pain. Accidental overdose, hospitalisations and death are often the result. Clearly something needs to change," Ms Bennett concluded.

Mary-Lynne Cochrane knows the inherent dangers of opioid use personally, after a long battle with a form of arthritis that involved three back surgeries, bone transplants and the replacement of nearly all her major joints.

"I always had to make sure I had enough pain-killers in the house. If I didn't have enough, I would panic at the thought of running out and not being able to relieve the pain. I believed my only choice was to cover up the pain rather than manage it," Ms Cochrane said.

Better care and treatment are part of a suite of recommendations contained in the draft National Strategic Action Plan for Pain Management which was funded, and is currently being considered by the Minister for Health, the Hon Greg Hunt MP.

"The verdict is clear and the evidence overwhelming – if we want to reduce reliance on quick fix medication solutions, we need to invest in the treatments that work alongside or instead of medication to maximise the health outcomes" Ms Bennett said.

"We have been encouraged by Minister Hunt's leadership in addressing chronic pain as a national health priority. In light of the ever-escalating cost of pain, we urge him and all Australian governments to invest in strategic, targeted action necessary to address the epidemic of pain conditions in this country," Ms Bennett concluded.

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