

Prescribing Corner

New Canadian guideline for safe and effective use of opioids for CNCP

Physicians and other practitioners have identified that patients presenting with Chronic Non-Cancer Pain (CNCP) can be challenging to manage. The morbidity and mortality of patients with CNCP is significant and increasing - CNCP affects 29 per cent of Canadians, with low back pain being the most common complaint.

Opioids are one of the important modalities that physicians use in treating these patients. However, the use of opioids is not without risk, and studies demonstrate that prescription opioids can have significant abuse potential.

Evidence, including the OPICAN study, indicates that prescription drugs are the major opioids of abuse in Alberta. Some physicians are hesitant or refuse to prescribe opioids due to the potential risk of abuse. Other physicians may not have appropriate safeguards in place to detect and manage misuse or addiction when it occurs.

To help physicians safely and effectively manage patient care when using opioids to treat CNCP, a new national, evidence-based guideline was developed through a two-year collaborative process.

The Canadian Guideline for Safe and Effective Use of Opioids for Chronic Non-Cancer Pain provides 24 recommendations to support primary-care physicians and specialists who treat CNCP patients with opioids. Pharmacists who dispense opioids and nurses and dentists involved in the treatment of patients with CNCP may also find the guideline helpful.

Recommendations from the guideline include practical advice for physicians who are deciding to initiate opioid therapy, conducting an opioid trial and



monitoring long-term opioid therapy. Practice tools and additional resources are included to support opioid prescribing practices. Use of the guideline by physicians is voluntary – the guideline is neither a policy nor a College Standard of Practice.

In May 2010, the complete guideline will be available in electronic format from the

National Pain Centre website at McMaster University (<http://nationalpaincentre.mcmaster.ca/opioid/>), and through links via medical regulatory authorities across Canada including the College of Physicians & Surgeons of Alberta. A French version of the guideline will be produced. Implementation activities will occur at local, provincial and national levels.

Who developed the new guideline?

In 2007, Canadian medical regulators identified the need for a guideline specific to treating CNCP with opioids. Under the umbrella of the Federation of Medical Regulatory Authorities of Canada (FMRAC), the National Opioid Use Guideline Group (NOUGG) was set up with members of FMRAC and the Canadian colleges to coordinate the development and implementation of the new guideline.

A research team reviewed the literature and drafted initial recommendations. The National Advisory Panel (comprised of 49 individuals from across Canada including pain specialists, family physicians, addiction experts, pharmacists, academics, nurses and patient group representatives) followed a formal process to review the draft recommendations from the research team. A minimum of 80 per cent consensus was required before a recommendation was accepted and included in the new guideline.

Funding to develop the guideline came from existing budgets of FMRAC and medical regulatory authorities across Canada.