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Fewer deaths and overdoses to result from opioid tracking

Fewer deaths and overdoses from the misuse of prescription opioids are likely to result from the Australian Government's announcement of a national electronic system to track the prescribing and dispensing of controlled drugs, specifically opioid analgesics used in the management of pain.

Real-time electronic tracking of the prescribing and dispensing of opioids was a major recommendation of the Prescription Opioid Policy released in 2009 by The Royal Australasian College of Physicians (RACP), to which the Faculty of Pain Medicine (FPM) of the Australian and New Zealand College of Anaesthetists (ANZCA) was a principal contributor.

That report recommended a web-based, real-time system for monitoring the prescription of drugs of dependence for the treatment of chronic pain.

FPM Dean, Dr David Jones, said the system would enable prescribing doctors and dispensing pharmacists to monitor prescriptions to provide more clinically effective, safer and cost-effective healthcare.

"Given the increasing prescription of opioids to deal with chronic pain over the past decade, the ability for doctors to know when a patient last received a controlled drug will ensure better outcomes for the patient and the community," Dr Jones said.

Professor Paul Haber, President of the Australasian Chapter of Addiction Medicine of the RACP, said a real-time prescription monitoring service was the first step toward solving problems with opioids and improving the management of chronic pain.

"This service is critical within the community and among doctors to ensure these medicines are available to those who need them, while making it even harder for them to be obtained incorrectly or sold on for illegal use," Professor Haber said.

A study published in *Injury Prevention* last year showed deaths reported to the Victorian Coroner involving oxycodone increased 21-fold from four in 2000 to 97 in 2009. At the same time, supply of the drug in Victoria increased from 7.5 milligrams per head of population to 67.5 milligrams nine years later.

Dr Jones said controlled drugs, such as oxycodone, morphine, codeine, methadone and fentanyl, were important in the treatment of some types of chronic pain when prescribed by a doctor with continuity of care.

However, he said there had been some evidence of black market diversion of the drugs and illicit use of pharmaceutical opioids, which had resulted in deaths, overdoses and the transmission of viruses through sharing needles.

“A real-time database will flag to doctors and pharmacists cases where people have been repeatedly seeking controlled drugs, sometimes from multiple sources, and help to manage the illicit use of these opioids,” Dr Jones said.

“It will also help doctors better manage the treatment of people who have chronic pain through monitoring their drug usage.”

The Australian Government this week announced \$5 million for the Electronic Recording and Reporting of Controlled Drugs system to begin nationally in July. It will monitor drugs listed under Schedule 8 of the Standard for the Uniform Scheduling of Medicines and Poisons, which is administered by the Therapeutic Goods Administration.

- **For more information, or to interview Dr David Jones, please contact ANZCA Media Manager Meaghan Shaw on (03) 8517 5303, 0408 259 369 or mshaw@anzca.edu.au. To interview Professor Paul Haber, please contact RACP Communications Officer Kate White on (02) 9256 9674, 0408 639 697 or kate.white@racp.edu.au.**