

Prescription opioids must not be dismissed: pain specialists

Pain specialists fear a groundswell of opposition to prescription opioids, as expressed by some on ABC TV *Four Corners* program tonight (Monday September 27), could be detrimental to the thousands of patients for whom they are effective.

The Faculty of Pain Medicine (FPM) of the Australian and New Zealand College of Anaesthetists (ANZCA) does, however, strongly support the views on the program that there is a need for better education of GPs and other practitioners in prescribing opioids.

“Thousands of people with chronic pain respond well to opioids and don’t develop an addiction if they are managed properly,” said Professor Milton Cohen, FPM’s Director of Professional Affairs.

“It would be disastrous for those people who respond well to opioids if this option was thrown out because of the risks of misuse.”

Last month, FPM published a position statement on opioids - “Principles regarding the use of opioid analgesics in patients with chronic non-cancer pain” - and has also written a checklist for GPs and other practitioners on prescribing opioids.

Professor Cohen said it was essential to discover an individual’s responsiveness to opioid therapy in terms of quality of life.

This could be achieved by conducting an individual six to eight-week trial which included explicit agreement over having just one prescriber, no “early repeats” or “loss replacement” prescriptions and limiting dosages.

Professor Cohen acknowledged there had been much controversy over the use of opioid-based painkillers - addiction being one of the side effects – but said the scientific literature and clinical experience showed individuals responded to opioids in different ways.

He said prescription opioid analgesics were important therapeutic tools in the management of pain and said prescribers must be thoroughly acquainted with the clinical pharmacology of opioids available.

Before prescribing opioids, the position statement recommends:

- Comprehensive assessment of the patient
- Adequate trial of other therapies
- Agreement regarding an opioid trial
- Conduct of an opioid trial
- Response to difficulty in achieving goals of an opioid trial.

To speak to Professor Cohen or for further information, please contact ANZCA Media Manager Clea Hincks on +61 3 9510 6299 or +61 418 583 276 or via e-mail on chincks@anzca.edu.au. The FPM position statement can be found at <http://www.anzca.edu.au/fpm/resources/professional-documents>

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