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Three months after surgery many Australian patients are still taking opioid medication, doctors' conference told

Patients at three Melbourne hospitals have been involved in research to see how their pain medication needs, and pain levels, change after surgery.

Anaesthetist Dr Megan Allen led the study of 884 people who were admitted for surgery at the Royal Melbourne Hospital, the Royal Women's Hospital and the Peter MacCallum Cancer Centre. This study follows the introduction of an opioid stewardship program at the hospitals to promote better prescribing and handling of opioid medication after surgery.

The study gives a revealing insight into the prescribing of opioids for patients and their pain relief needs after surgery. Patients' opioid use and pain levels were followed up at two weeks and again at three months after leaving hospital.

In the study findings to be presented at the Australian and New Zealand College of Anaesthetists' (ANZCA) Faculty of Pain Medicine free paper session on Sunday 2 May Dr Allen found that 74 per cent of patients were given opioid medication on discharge from hospital after surgery.

At two weeks, 84 per cent of patients had pain at the site of surgery and 17 per cent required ongoing opioid pain relief. At three months, 33 per cent had pain at the site of surgery and nearly 10 per cent were still taking opioids. For patients who were not on opioids before their hospital admission 5.5 per cent were still taking opioids at three months.

Extra opioid supply after hospital discharge was required by 25 per cent of patients. Left over opioids were held by 67 per cent of patients and only six per cent of patients reported disposing of excess opioids by two weeks. At three months 36 per cent of patients reported having left over opioids and 32 per cent reported disposing of opioids.

Dr Allen said the study highlighted the challenges of optimising opioid prescribing for doctors in Australian hospitals.

"Opioid stewardship programs aim to harness the benefits of opioids for acute pain, and minimise the harms. This study provides information about opioid medications patients are prescribed after surgery, opioid consumption and how patients manage their opioids after hospital discharge. Given how commonly surgery is performed for five per cent of patients to be taking opioids three months after surgery is a large number. Opioids may not be the ideal pain treatment for all of these patients long term."

"We have seen some positive changes with the opioid stewardship program but more improvement is possible. This study provides an overview on opioid use after many different surgeries but future research may involve particular types of surgery or patient groups to better tailor treatment for acute pain" according to Dr Allen.

Dr Allen said the study, funded by an ANZCA research project grant, would further enhance information and understanding about opioid prescribing and use by patients when they are recovering from surgery.

A 2019 global review of opioid prescribing after surgery published in *The Lancet* concluded that inappropriate opioid prescribing after surgery is a growing concern. About one in five adults live with chronic pain. Some of this starts with surgery and has been associated with a rising epidemic of prescription opioid misuse, abuse and overdose-related deaths.

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