

Rising Use And Abuse Of Narcotics

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The excessive use of prescription narcotics and controlled substances has emerged as a public health and safety issue in Canada, the United States and other jurisdictions around the world.

What Are Narcotics and Controlled Substances?

Opioids (also commonly referred to as narcotics) are drugs used to relieve pain. They are among the most potent medications available for the treatment of moderate to severe pain.

There are two types of oral narcotics – short-acting and long-acting. Percocet and Tylenol 3 are examples of short-acting medications while OxyContin (which contains oxycodone) is an example of a long-acting medication. The effects of long-acting medications last about 12 hours, compared to four-to-six hours for short-acting medications.

There are various clinical guidelines available for the treatment of chronic non-cancer pain. The National Opioid Use Guideline Group has recently released the Canadian Guideline for Safe and Effective Use of Opioids for Chronic Non-Cancer Pain.

Controlled substances include a number of drugs that are known to have potential for abuse. These substances are defined by Health Canada under the Controlled Drugs and Substances Act.

Examples of controlled substances include stimulants, such as Ritalin (methylphenidate), Valium (benzodiazepines), and barbiturates (phenobarbital).

Increasing Use of Narcotics

Canada is one of the world's top per capita users of prescription narcotics. In Canada, Ontario is at the top of the list of narcotic use per capita.

- Since 1991, prescriptions for oxycodone-containing medications rose by 900 per cent.
- The ministry spent \$156 million on narcotics for Ontario Drug Benefit Program recipients in 2009-10, for 3.9 million prescriptions. This equates to an average of over six prescriptions per person, and an annual cost of \$260 per person.
- Narcotics abuse-related admissions to publicly funded treatment and addiction services in Ontario doubled from 2004-08.
- A number of First Nations communities have declared a state of emergency over the abuse of prescription narcotics, particularly oxycodone-containing drugs.

Rising Number of Narcotic-Related Deaths

- Since 2004, the number of oxycodone-related deaths in Ontario has nearly doubled.
- The median age of patients who had a narcotic-related death was 40 years.

Increasing Narcotic-Related Crime and Health Risks from Abuse of Narcotics and Other Controlled Substances

Prescription narcotics and other controlled substances have become a highly lucrative street commodity resulting in widespread diversion and trafficking by both individuals and organized crime groups.

In Toronto, prescription drug arrests doubled between 2005 and 2008, while prescription drug charges rose by almost 200 per cent.

There has also been a significant increase in pharmacy robberies and thefts of prescription narcotics, putting pharmacists' safety at risk across the province and raising health risks.

What the government is doing to support treatment of addictions and substance abuse

The ministry currently allocates approximately \$172 million annually to about 150 addiction programs for treatment of substance abuse and problem gambling. These treatment programs include withdrawal management, community counselling and residential treatment and support services.

Since 2003, the government has increased funding for addiction programs by 65 per cent.

Ontario's Narcotics Strategy has a focus on treating patients with addiction. The strategy includes a longer-term objective to investigate additional options for treating and supporting those addicted to prescription narcotics and other controlled substances.

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