



Position statement on opioid use in the United Kingdom

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In reaction to the recent statement from Matt Hancock, Secretary of State for Health, it is Pain UK's position that opioids remain a vital class of medicines to mitigate pain when their use is appropriately monitored by healthcare professionals and patients. Additionally, there is a requirement for up to date education about opioids' potential risk to health.

Importantly, opioids can be used for the treatment of acute pain episodes such as ankle sprains, and for the management of chronic pain conditions including fibromyalgia and diabetic neuropathy (Rosenquist: 2019). Although opioids can be highly addictive, opioid dependence rarely develops when they are used for the short-term treatment of pain and when their use is appropriately scrutinised by healthcare professionals on a regular basis (International Association for the Study of Pain: 2018).

While opioids have demonstrable value in the treatment of acute pain, their role in the management of chronic pain has recently come into question due to long-term, and poorly monitored, prescribing habits in the US which have resulted in heightened levels of opioid - related illness and death. It is widely acknowledged that the ongoing 'opioid crisis' in the US is a major public health issue which has necessitated a wide-ranging policy response from government agencies, especially in relation to the use of opioids for the management of chronic pain.

However, in the UK, the situation surrounding the use of opioids is by no means directly comparable to the US and decision-makers this side of the Atlantic are already learning about the challenges arising from excessive opioid use within society. Importantly, prescribing levels for opioids are significantly lower in the UK compared to the US (OECD: 2019) and UK-based healthcare professionals are already reflecting on their prescribing habits by taking caution when writing repeat prescriptions and by limiting the size, and duration of, opioid-based prescriptions (Levy et al: 2019). Due to the acknowledged clinical efficacy of opioids in treating pain, the reflective behaviour of UK healthcare professionals, and increasing levels of awareness of the possible risks associated with opioid usage by UK patients, opioids should continue to play a central role in effective and responsible pain management.

Importantly, there is an ongoing need to increase educational awareness and to provide extra support for patients who use opioids to manage their pain. Opioids are just one of several classes of medication which can help people to manage their pain. The use of opioids should not be seen in isolation as effective pain management also relies on adequate housing, physical activity, psychological support, and in many cases voluntary or paid work, all of which improve the self-

management of pain. By raising awareness about responsible opioid use, we hope that anyone who needs them for their pain self-management will be able to access them both now and in the future.

Pain UK supports the ongoing use of opioids for the treatment, and management of, acute and chronic pain. However, Pain UK will welcome the requirement to put warnings on packages of medicines containing opioids, about the risk of harm including addiction and sees this as a positive move towards implementing a range of actions directed to improve the information and education of the public and also healthcare professionals, on the limitations and potential harms from prolonged use of opioid-containing medicines.

The use of opioids for patients living with pain must be properly monitored by prescribing healthcare professionals via regular face-to-face review. Equally, individuals who purchase over-the-counter codeine-based products must continue to be appropriately informed by pharmacists about the potential risk of addiction. Pain UK advocates for access to opioids for the treatment of pain, in all its forms, while raising awareness about their potential health risks and by providing up-to-date information to avoid possible misuse. Utilising robust education, monitoring and prescribing information, we can carry on treating pain with opioids in an effective and responsible fashion.

References:

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