

Criminal activity should not dictate health-care policy

By JOHN STEWART

Re: "Group seeks better drug monitoring" (June 5). On behalf of Purdue Pharma, I would like to congratulate the members of the Community Partnership on Prescription Drug Abuse for the time and energy devoted to preparation of their interim report.

Purdue's objectives are consistent with those of the community group - to share experiences and concerns about pain management and misuse of prescription drugs, and to take actions that will help reduce drug abuse.

The report shows that a greater percentage of the population in the Cape Breton District Health Authority has been prescribed oxycodone and fentanyl-containing drugs than in the remainder of Nova Scotia.

On the other hand, it also shows that a lesser percentage of the Cape Breton population has been prescribed morphine and hydromorphone. Thus, the difference between opioid prescribing/utilization between Cape Breton and the remainder of Nova Scotia is not as great as it appears on the basis of oxycodone alone.

However, some differences in overall opioid utilization might well be anticipated from the survey findings of the higher incidence of severe pain in Cape Breton.

Oxycodone is the drug substance contained in several analgesics, including OxyContin - as well as the more frequently used oxycodone combination products such as Percodan/Percocet - and is one of the prescription opiates targeted for abuse and trafficking. Purdue knows that prescription drug abuse is a serious health problem and, like the community partnership, is taking action to help combat prescription drug abuse in general - and OxyContin abuse in particular.

Pain affects millions of Canadians every day, and Purdue's focus is also to ensure that patients truly in need of opioids to relieve their pain are able to receive them. At the same time, we are committed to helping educate health-care professionals on how to reduce diversion and abuse of all opioids, with programs that offer information and tools to help assess, treat, document and follow patients on opioids.

We believe criminal activity should not dictate health care policy. The answer

to abuse of prescription medications is greater education and substance abuse treatment. The answer to diversion is tough law enforcement, not restrictions on patients and the physicians who treat them.

Solving the longstanding problem of misuse and diversion of prescription medications will require the co-operation of many elements of society, including health care professionals, patients and their families, law enforcement organizations, regulatory bodies and the pharmaceutical companies. Purdue will contribute to these efforts, and in ways that should help reduce abuse of all drugs. As the interim report so correctly notes, success will not come in the form of solving the abuse of one drug only to have it replaced by the abuse of others.

John Stewart is executive vice-president/general manager, Purdue Canada

Copyright © 2004 The Halifax Herald Limited