

# THE WINDSOR STAR

## Opioids safe painkillers when used as prescribed

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A Windsor Star story, Painkiller Linked to 250 Ontario Deaths (Aug. 4), has been seriously misinterpreted as a report of deaths caused exclusively by OxyContin.

The article stated, "In the past five years there were 300 deaths in Ontario in which oxycodone, an opiate found in the brands OxyContin and Percocet, was detected in the body, said the province's chief coroner, Dr. Barry McLellan." However, several subsequent stories ran under the general headline of OxyContin Blamed For 250 Deaths In Ontario.

A recent publication from the Ontario coroner's office confirms that the report relates to oxycodone, the drug substance, not specifically the registered trademark OxyContin, a product that contains oxycodone, which was detected in drug screens over the five-year period from 1999-2003.

The study did not attempt to determine whether the oxycodone was due to the ingestion of OxyContin or another oxycodone-containing product. In addition, the study was not designed to compare the number of oxycodone-related deaths with the number of deaths in Ontario related to other opioids, such as morphine, hydromorphone and fentanyl, or illicit drugs, such as cocaine and heroin.

Oxycodone is the drug substance found in eight prescription products approved for sale in Canada. The OxyContin brand represented about five per cent of prescriptions for all opioids in Canada in 2003, whereas the more frequently prescribed oxycodone combination products -- brands such as Percodan/Percocet -- represented about 15 per cent of all opioid prescriptions.

Prescriptions for opioids in general, and specifically oxycodone-containing products, have been increasing over time. This may be related to an increased prevalence of chronic pain, the aging population and growing awareness of pain management options.

The report from the coroner's office indicates that almost all of the cases involved polydrug use, and that the combined effects of several drugs may have been the cause of death in the majority of cases.

Similarly, coroners' data from a recent U.S. study (Cone et al, 2003) indicated that the vast majority -- 97 per cent -- of drug-abuse deaths involving oxycodone were related to ingestion of multiple drugs.

Purdue understands that prescription drug abuse is a serious health problem, and that it involves essentially all of the opioid analgesics, not solely OxyContin. It is the abuse of these medications, not the medications themselves, that is the cause of the problem.

Purdue will continue to combat OxyContin abuse in particular, and prescription drug abuse in general, through education of health-care practitioners, support of programs to identify

fraudulently obtained prescriptions, and through research into pain medications that are more resistant to abuse.

However, it must not be forgotten that serious pain affects millions of Canadians every year, and that when used appropriately, OxyContin and other opioids are safe and help to significantly improve quality of life.

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