
Opioid addiction

Addiction expert Dr Christian Rowan highlights the growing issue of pharmaceutical abuse

The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare National Drug Strategy Household Survey results showed that the misuse of pharmaceuticals is on the rise, from 4.2 per cent in 2010 to 4.7 per cent in 2013.

Addiction Medicine Specialist Dr Christian Rowan confirmed pharmaceutical abuse is a growing problem in Queensland.

Addressing the 2014 Australian Winter School Conference in Brisbane in late July, Dr Rowan said the increased prevalence of chronic pain and growing use of prescription and over-the-counter painkillers is contributing to higher rates of addiction and substance dependency.

Dr Rowan said there was a need for public education and health professional awareness of the dangers of becoming dependent on prescription and over-the-counter medication, and a greater need for multidisciplinary services for chronic pain sufferers, particularly in the public health sector.

“Opioids are often marketed and prescribed as the drug of choice to treat chronic pain. However, there has been a lack of awareness of the risk of addiction with some of these drugs, where their use may be appropriate for short-term pain management, but not as a long-term solution.”

Dr Rowan, who is the medical director of Addiction Sciences Queensland and director of medical services at St Andrew’s War Memorial Hospital, said “doctor shopping” was an ongoing issue, with some patients receiving prescriptions from multiple doctors and gaining access to unsafe quantities of prescription drugs.

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Dr Rowan said 30 per cent of the Australian population will experience chronic pain in their lifetime, and this, coupled with an ageing population, is contributing to the rise in use of prescription opioid painkillers.

Other factors contributing to the issue include increased prevalence of mental health problems, lifestyle-related chronic conditions, and industry marketing of pharmaceutical products.

Dr Rowan said treating co-morbid pain and addiction conditions should focus on use of therapies other than conventional painkiller drugs, such as education, cognitive-behavioural therapy, physiotherapy and occupational therapy.

He suggested better data collection systems, further research at state and federal levels, real time monitoring systems, engagement with the pharmaceutical industry, and enhanced availability of pain and addiction treatment clinics and services could help address the issue. [PH](#)