

# Prescription Drug Misuse in Alberta: Everyone's Problem

A Report by Alberta's Chief Medical Officer of Health

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## Background Story

*On March 23, 2010, during a symposium on prescription drug misuse, a lovely and dignified, but sad couple told the story of losing their beloved daughter to an overdose of prescription drugs. She was the light of their lives and they were very proud when she left home to go to University. Unfortunately, she was involved in a car accident, was prescribed strong pain killers for her injuries and continued to take them after she had physically recovered. Within six months and without anyone noticing, she was obtaining prescriptions from multiple doctors and filling them in multiple pharmacies. Her addiction eventually led directly to a death from overdose of the pain killers.*

*A Medical Officer of Health who listened to the story approached the parents once the meeting had finished and thanked them for sharing their memories of their daughter. He asked: "It has been years now since her death and you obviously still grieve when you tell her story. Why do you continue to re-live this?" The father answered for both of them with quiet dignity, "We just want to make sure that someone does something to ensure that no one else's daughter dies this way. We want to make sure her death means something. We want someone to take responsibility for preventing this."*

*The Medical Officer of Health reflected afterwards on the wisdom of the parent's statement. It was a preventable death; the Government of Alberta had paid for the physician visits, the prescriptions, the rehabilitation and the cost of an autopsy. He also reflected that while many groups have a role to play in ensuring this doesn't happen again, no one is ultimately responsible for ensuring the safety of those who are prescribed powerful drugs by the health care system.*

## The Problem

Canadians are among the heaviest consumers of psychotropic medications and prescription drugs for non-medical purposes in the world and Alberta is not immune to this trend.

The Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse defines prescription drug abuse as the "...use of pharmaceutical drugs with centrally acting reinforcing properties that is associated with increased risk for harm, as characterized by obtaining drugs from illegitimate sources, or risky patterns of use (excluding under-use), that deviate from accepted medical practice and/or scientific knowledge, or taking the drugs for purposes which are not therapeutic."

The misuse and abuse of prescription drugs is harming too many Albertans. Virtually every Alberta community has been affected and no one "type" of person is affected more than another. Ease of access and affordability of medications such as opioid pain relievers, (i.e. Percodan®, Demerol®, and OxyContin®); stimulants, (i.e. Ritalin®, Concerta®, Adderall®, and Dexedrine®); as well as tranquilizers and sedatives, (i.e. Valium®, Ativan®, and Xanax®) can quickly and easily lead to addiction (Health Canada, 2009). Compounding this ease of accessibility and affordability is the false perception that if a health care practitioner prescribes these medications, they are safe.

Until responsibility for solving the problem is assigned, Alberta Health and Wellness is contributing to the funding of prescription drug misuse but could be doing more to prevent the problem by using tools at our disposal to save lives as well as reduce or eliminate some of the associated costs to the system.

## Statistics

- In 2002, nearly 8% of Alberta adults reported non-medicinal use of sedatives (barbiturates), tranquilizers, and painkillers at least once in the previous year (Addiction and Mental Health Research Laboratory, 2008).
- In 2008, almost one in five (17.2%) Alberta students in grades 7–12 reported illicit prescription drug use in their lifetime (Alberta Health Services Addiction and Mental Health, 2009).
- Prescription drug misuse is common among inner-city drug users. Almost 90% reported misusing at least one prescription drug in the past 30 days (Addiction and Mental Health Research Laboratory, 2008).
- A survey of a high-risk group of Aboriginal clients entering addiction treatment in Calgary found that approximately half (48%) of respondents indicated that they used prescription drugs for reasons other than the drug's intended purpose (Wardman, Khan, el-Guebaly, 2002).

## What are the main issues?

### *Everyone must be held responsible but it requires someone to take the lead.*

Prescription drug misuse is a system wide problem that negatively impacts the health of thousands and contributes significantly to health care costs. Although this problem is systemic, no one person or group either internal or external to the health care system is currently held accountable for preventing it.

Alberta would greatly benefit from the enhancement of patient safety systems where one body is responsible for education, prevention and health promotion on the safe use of prescription drugs. By failing to do this we are not only allowing the problem to continue, we could also be allowing it to grow.

The Office of the Chief Medical Officer of Health and other AHW divisions with a stake in the problem of prescription drug misuse can work together to tackle this problem. Stakeholders that should be brought together to address this problem from a system-wide perspective include: Alberta College of Pharmacists, Alberta Health Services, Edmonton and Calgary Police Services, College of Physicians and Surgeons of Alberta, College and Association of Registered Nurses, Alberta College of Social Workers, Alberta Employment and Immigration, Alberta Seniors and Community Supports, Alberta Health and Wellness, Alberta Blue Cross, Health Canada, the RCMP and possibly the Health Quality Council of Alberta and the Coalition of Prescription Drug Misuse.

Professional bodies play a critical role in protecting the public's health and well-being by guiding and governing their membership to ensure safe and effective care. The College of Physicians and Surgeons mission is to serve the public by guiding the medical profession. Safe and effective medical care is specifically emphasized in one of the College's four goals, contributing to designing and implementing new models of care.

The Alberta College of Pharmacists governs the pharmacy profession in Alberta and takes responsibility for pharmacy practice by setting and enforcing high standards of competence and ethical conduct to ensure safe, effective and efficient practice. The College and Association of Registered Nurses of Alberta mandate is to protect the public by ensuring that Albertans receive effective, safe and ethical care by registered nurses.

The Coalition on Prescription Drug Misuse (CoOPDM), comprised of organizations and individuals that have voluntarily and collaboratively come together, acts as a catalyst and coordinator to foster information sharing, education enlightenment and cooperation related to prescription drug misuse.

In response to stakeholder feedback, the CoOPDM identified various actions it will take to address this issue. While it believes that a strategy must be led by government, the CoOPDM recognizes the role it can have in efforts to educate and build awareness, work with media to build awareness; and work with government and partners to plan and coordinate a public social marketing campaign.

### ***Safety education is lacking***

A lack of education on the dangers of prescription drug misuse has been cited as a reason that the problem persists. Progress can be made on the issue of prescription drug misuse with only a few changes to the health care system to improve education for patients and health care practitioners:

1. Better educating practitioners such as physicians, pharmacists and nurses about the dangers and ease of prescription drug misuse and addiction.
2. Better informing the general public about the need to exercise caution when using these potentially dangerous medications and to watch for signs of addiction in themselves and others.
3. More effective monitoring of the use of prescription drugs within our health care system including data sharing and analysis to better inform health care practitioners of patient's needs.

By improving how we do these three things we can counter the dangerous perception that because these drugs are prescribed by a health care practitioner, they are safe.

### ***The Government of Alberta pays for the Problem***

**We do know** that the health care system as a whole finances the majority of the problem from beginning to the sometimes tragic end. From the physician visits to obtain the prescription, to the subsidized prescription drug costs, the costs of rehabilitation and too often the cost of an autopsy; this cost is paid for by the Government of Alberta.

As health care costs continue to grow and lives continue to be devastated by prescription drug misuse, the system can't afford to let these financial and human costs go unchecked.

**We don't know** the dollar value of both the direct and indirect costs of prescription drug misuse both on the health care system and society as a whole. Despite an exhaustive search and soliciting the help of the University of Alberta Addiction and Mental Health Research Laboratory, the College of Physicians and Surgeons of Alberta, Alberta Health Services, peer reviewed literature and other jurisdictions, there are no estimates on either the direct or indirect costs of prescription drug misuse in Alberta.

However, given anecdotal accounts from those affected, stakeholders and the Coalition on Prescription Drug Misuse, it seems reasonable to assume that costs to the Ministry of Health and Wellness and to the Government of Alberta are significant.

### **Sharing and Analyzing Data**

Currently, data on prescription drug misuse is available from multiple sources. The problem lies with the fact that this data is often not shared among the multiple stakeholders able to make a difference in helping those at risk of, or currently misusing prescription drugs. In addition, much of the data is used for other purposes related to patient care and never analyzed to identify patterns in prescription drug misuse thereby representing a lost opportunity to save lives.

In the future, prescription drug misuse could be combated much more effectively if prescription drug use data was shared among the many stakeholders who collect it and analyzed in a way that focused specifically on patient safety concerns. If this data was made available in real time to stakeholders such as pharmacists and physicians, interventions could be made to both prevent when a patient is at risk and intervene when prescription drug misuse is occurring.

### **Moving Forward: Recommendations for Action**

In order to effectively tackle the issue of prescription drug misuse in Alberta, it is necessary to advance the discussion with all partners in and outside the health system. Specifically, we need to have all the partners recognize that this is a safety issue for patients and clients and requires a system-wide approach.

1. The Office of the Chief Medical Officer of Health will provide leadership and coordination to advance the discussion and initiate action that will address prescription drug misuse in Alberta.
2. The Office of the Chief Medical Officer of Health will work with partners to increase safe practices, eliminate misuse and improve patient safety.
3. Alberta Health and Wellness will work with partners to examine system data to better inform the extent of the problem and information technology solutions to decrease misuse and improve safety.
4. Alberta Health and Wellness (Addiction and Mental Health) will engage CoOPDM to identify additional opportunities within and external to the health system to reduce prescription drug misuse.

## References:

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