

I'm Worried About People in Pain

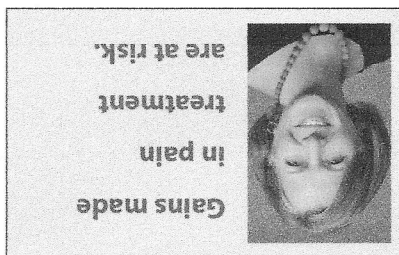
Efforts to address prescription opioid abuse may lead to unintended consequences.

before opioids can be prescribed. Insurance prior authorization is required for many opioids. Meanwhile, patients wait in pain or experience opioid withdrawal.

Controlling prescription drug abuse is critical, as is improved access to mental health and addiction treatment. But there is no "quick fix" for these complex problems. State prescription drug monitoring programs must collaborate to make databases available to clinicians across state lines. Prior authorization processes must be more efficient and more transparent. Clinicians should follow current guidelines that recommend comprehensive assessment and ongoing screening before and during opioid therapy; initiating opioids after risk-benefit analysis and as part of an individualized plan; measurable treatment goals; and follow-up based on individual risk stratification. Treatment agreements are also recommended to set clear expectations for providers and patients.

Alleviation of suffering is a foundational element of nursing practice. Nurses in practice, policy, and authority must advocate for measures that alleviate suffering associated with pain and facilitate communication among patients, caregivers, and multiple providers to prevent misunderstandings about pain management from becoming impediments to care. Pain management education, including response to opioid prescribing, should be a core competency for all health care providers. Pain clinicians and people with pain must be at the table when new regulations affecting pain care are proposed and debated. Additional research into the risks and benefits of long-term opioid therapy is important, as is a comprehensive approach to identify and treat substance use disorders. But denying or making access to pain medications more difficult for people with pain is not the solution. ▲

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Gains made in pain treatment are at risk. New regulations threaten access to opioids for people with a comprehensive treatment plan.

According to a 2011 Institute of Medicine report, chronic pain is a public health crisis, with more people experiencing chronic pain than heart disease, cancer, and diabetes combined. Well-intended efforts to address prescription drug abuse—another public health crisis—may place heavy burdens on people with pain who benefit from opioids and use them responsibly as part of a comprehensive treatment plan.

At the same time, patients feel stigmatized by increased scrutiny of their analgesics. Pain and advocacy organizations report an upsurge in calls from patients experiencing difficulties getting prescriptions from health care practices and pharmacies. Some retail pharmacists are required to determine if opioid therapy is appropriate before filling prescriptions. Some states and insurers restrict doses or numbers of tablets and others require trials of alternate medications

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