



Australia's escalating opioid use focus of pain forum

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The hidden casualties of Australia's opioid epidemic – middle aged men and women – will be the focus of an opioid and chronic pain forum organised by Australia's top pain medicine body, the Faculty of Pain Medicine (FPM), on Saturday June 16.

Faculty Dean Dr Meredith Craigie said the Melbourne forum was significant as it brings together pain medicine specialists, addiction experts and health officials to examine opioid prescribing and the alarming rise in opioid related deaths in Australia and New Zealand. The faculty is part of the Australian and New Zealand College of Anaesthetists.

More people now die in Australia from accidental drug overdoses than in road accidents and prescription painkillers now cause two and a half times more deaths than illicit drugs. This is a major concern considering an estimated one in five Australians now live with chronic pain.

According to a 2017 report from Australia's National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre the rate of accidental opioid deaths has more than doubled among Australians aged 35 to 44 since 2007. Seventy per cent of the deaths involved strong prescription painkillers.

"Many of these deaths are preventable and pain medicine specialists and clinicians need to understand what is driving the rise in accidental opioid deaths but more importantly what can be done to prevent it," Dr Craigie said.

"Many of the patients seen by pain medicine specialists are middle aged men and women whose first experience of an opioid is when they are prescribed medication to treat their pain. They can quickly build up a tolerance and it's when they try to withdraw or combine these medications with other drugs that severe reactions or accidental death occurs."

"Unfortunately we are at risk of heading down the track of the US so we need to intervene now. The dangers of long-term opioid use are clear. We should be concerned. Those most at risk of opioid abuse in Australia and New Zealand are middle aged men and, to a lesser extent, women, who are simply trying to live with their chronic pain."

Dr Craigie said educating medical practitioners and consumers about better pain management strategies was essential to achieve changes in attitudes and behaviours that will lead to safe and appropriate prescribing and use of opioids.

The forum will examine patient discharge prescribing practices, the introduction of real-time prescription monitoring systems to assist safe prescribing and non-drug pain management strategies for patients and specialists.

Speakers include Gippsland-based Rustie Lassam, who will speak candidly about her own 30-year addiction to opioids to manage back pain, specialist pain medicine physicians from NSW, Victoria and Queensland and real-time prescription monitoring system experts.

Dr Craigie said the forum was timely as it follows the recent announcement of \$150,000 from the federal government to develop a national action plan for chronic pain management.

According to the Penington Institute's Australia's Annual Overdose Report 2017 Australians are now far more likely to overdose on opioids including codeine and oxycodone than by sleeping tablets, alcohol and amphetamines.

- In 2011-2015, 3601 people died from an opioid overdose — a 1.6 fold increase from 2001-2005.
- In 2015, 70 per cent of all accidental deaths occurred in the 30-59 age group.
- Since 2001 the number of accidental drug-related deaths in the 30-59 age group has almost doubled from 540 to 1071.

The forum will be held at ANZCA House, 630 St Kilda Road Melbourne from 9-5pm.