

To: All GP Practice Clinical
Governance Leads for cascade to all
Prescribers and Practice
Pharmacists

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Dear Colleague

FOR ACTION: REVIEW OF PATIENTS ON HIGH DOSE OPIOIDS FOR PERSISTENT NON-MALIGNANT PAIN

There have been increasing concerns expressed regarding the safe and appropriate use of opioids^{1,2}. We appreciate that misuse and abuse of opioids is a multifaceted issue requiring a range of individuals and organisations to collaborate with the Health service to adequately address this societal problem. The purpose of this letter is to inform good prescribing practice in primary care.

The Royal College of Anaesthetists, Faculty of Pain Medicine advises that **‘the risk of harm increases substantially at doses above an oral morphine equivalent of 120mg/day but there is no increased benefit’**³. Therefore, opioid doses greater than an oral morphine equivalent of 120mg/day should not be prescribed for persistent non-malignant pain.

A review of NI prescribing data has identified an average of **5 patients per practice** who are prescribed an oral morphine equivalent of $\geq 160\text{mg/day}$ for more than 6 months. This search included individual strong opioids however was limited by the ability to identify patients on combinations of opioids. As a result it is expected that some practices will have significantly higher numbers of patients receiving a total oral morphine equivalent of $\geq 120\text{mg/day}$.

¹ BBC News – NHS Accused of Fuelling Rise in opioid addiction <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-43304375>

² BBC News -Operation Torus: Opioids killed more than road deaths <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-39352345>

³ Royal College of Anaesthetists - Faculty of Pain Management: Opioids Aware Resources <https://www.rcoa.ac.uk/faculty-of-pain-medicine/opioids-aware>

We appreciate that many of these patients will be under routine review. However, given the potential for adverse outcomes through long term opioid use, we ask practices to consider the following:

ACTION BY GP PRACTICES:

- Identify patients prescribed high doses of opioids (i.e. $\geq 120\text{mg/day}$ oral morphine equivalent) for persistent non-malignant pain. The following opioid dose calculator may be useful to calculate total opioid equivalents, especially where patients are being prescribed a combination of different products or strengths or preparations: <http://www.paindata.org/calculator.php>. Your practice pharmacist may be able to help with this.
- Prioritise patients for review and aim to gradually reduce doses, in line with guidance and with careful monitoring. Individually agreed reduction plans that take account of other strategies to support patients e.g. pain self-management skills, sleep hygiene are helpful
- Review prescribing protocols to ensure opioids are prescribed appropriately for persistent non-malignant pain.

Thank you in advance for your support with this important governance work (please note that this could be considered as part of your practice governance plans). Further information and resources to support this work can be found below. We continue to work with secondary care and other agencies around this issue and trust that concerted action will help mitigate the impact of this particular problem.

If you have any queries in relation to this letter, please contact your Pharmacy Adviser in the first instance.

Your sincerely,



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Head of Pharmacy and Medicines
Management
HSCB Accountable Officer for
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Dr Margaret O'Brien
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Further Support Materials

Opioid Prescribing

Resources for Health Care Professionals

Opioid Prescribing in Chronic Pain

http://niformulary.hscni.net/Formulary/Adult/PDF/Opioids_in_Chronic_Pain.pdf

Opioid Prescribing for Persistent Pain

- Frequently Asked Questions
<http://primarycare.hscni.net/download/DocLibrary/Pharmacy/Clinical/Pain/Opioid-Prescribing-FAQs.pdf>
- Traffic Lights – Points for Safer Prescribing
<http://primarycare.hscni.net/download/DocLibrary/Pharmacy/Clinical/Pain/Opioid-Prescribing-Points-for-Safer-Prescribing.pdf>

Pain Management Newsletters

<http://niformulary.hscni.net/PrescribingNewsletters/MedicinesManagement/supplement/PS/Pages/default.aspx>

Opioids and Chronic Pain Management Webinars for Practitioners

<https://www.prescgipp.info/media/opioid-aware-webinar-session-1-of-2-13-october-dr-ruth-bastable>

<https://www.prescgipp.info/media/opioid-aware-next-steps-webinar-session-2-of-2-18-october-dr-ruth-bastable>

Other Opioid resources for practitioners

<http://livewellwithpain.co.uk/>

Resources for Patients

Patient / Service user websites

<https://www.paintoolkit.org/http://livewellwithpain.co.uk/resources-for-your-patients/information-and-worksheets/>

<http://niformulary.hscni.net/PatientZone/Pain/Pages/default.aspx>

<http://www.drugsandalcoholni.info/>

Patient / Service user information leaflet available for GP to print from:

<http://primarycare.hscni.net/download/DocLibrary/Pharmacy/Clinical/Pain/Opioid-Prescribing-Patient-Information-Leaflet.pdf>