

New Record: 9 million opioid prescriptions filled in Ontario

New report also finds more people in Ontario prescribed stronger opioids

TORONTO, ON – May 17, 2017 - People in Ontario filled more than 9 million prescriptions for opioids in 2015/16, up by nearly 450,000 prescriptions from three years earlier, and the opioids being prescribed have shifted toward stronger types like hydromorphone and away from weaker opioids like codeine, a new report has found.

According to *9 Million Opioid Prescriptions*, a report by Health Quality Ontario, nearly two million people in Ontario fill prescriptions for opioids every year -- translating into one in every seven Ontarians, or 14% of the province's population.

And despite the increasing awareness publicly and in the physician community regarding the numbers of opioid-related deaths and the prevalence of opioid addiction, the number of people who filled opioid prescriptions in the province has not decreased from three years ago.

"Addiction to opioids is a critically urgent health problem in our province, and nationally," says Joshua Tepper, Health Quality Ontario's President and CEO. "We need to prescribe opioids more safely than we do now, and we also need to provide better access and higher-quality care for people who have an opioid addiction."

Looking at the types of opioids being prescribed in Ontario, the report found the number of people who filled a prescription for hydromorphone – which is approximately five times stronger than morphine – increased by nearly 30% over three years, to almost 259,000 people, from just over 200,000. Over that same time, the number of people who filled a prescription for codeine and codeine compounds – a weaker opioid than morphine – decreased by 7% to more than 912,000 people, from almost 986,000. The number of prescriptions filled for oxycodone and oxycodone compounds, meanwhile, remained almost unchanged over three years, despite the increasingly common knowledge about the harm from opioids.

The number of opioid prescriptions filled varies substantially by region in Ontario, ranging from 38 prescriptions filled per 100 people in the Central Local Health Integration Network region to nearly triple that number – 110 prescriptions filled per 100 people – in the North East region of the province.

In the report, a patient and a health care professional each share their own stories. Christine, a nurse from Ottawa, began taking opioids for pain from injuries she sustained after a car crash. She eventually became addicted to the drugs and began buying them on the street, which sent her into a downward spiral that included time in prison and then being homeless.

"When I came out of incarceration, I ended up in a shelter," Christine says in the report. "I ended up doing other drugs that I never expected to do... it just got worse. You can't just stop."

To help tackle the growing opioid problem, and at the request of the Minister of Health and Long-Term Care, Health Quality Ontario is developing three sets of quality standards – one will provide guidance to patients and clinicians about what high quality care looks like for adults and

adolescents with opioid use disorder and the other two will provide guidance on how to prescribe opioids for management of chronic and acute pain. These standards are being developed in collaboration with patients, caregivers, physicians, nurses, clinicians and organizations across the province. Based on the best available evidence, drafts of the quality standards will be posted to the Health Quality Ontario website with a call for feedback this fall.

Health Quality Ontario will also make practice reports available to family doctors this fall, which will enable them to compare their opioid prescribing to that of their peers and to best practices, and which will provide links to resources and strategies to support improvement.

Governments of all levels are working to support better prescribing practices and reduce easy access to unnecessary opioids to improve prevention, treatment and harm reduction associated with problematic opioid use.

To read the full report visit: www.hqontario.ca/OpioidPrescribing.

About Health Quality Ontario

Health Quality Ontario is the provincial advisor on the quality of health care. With the goal of excellent care for all Ontarians, Health Quality Ontario reports to the public on how the system is performing, develops standards for what quality care looks like, evaluates the effectiveness of new health care technologies and services, and promotes quality improvement aimed at substantial and sustainable positive change. Visit www.hqontario.ca for more information.

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For more information, or to book an interview, contact:

Reena Kudhail, Senior Communications Advisor, Health Quality Ontario

reena.kudhail@hqontario.ca

O: 416 323-6868, ext. 694, C: 416-770-1898