OPIOID ANALGESICS: THE MOST DANGEROUS DRUGS IN THE WESTERN PHARMACOPOEIA?

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Opioid analgesics have a recognised role in the treatment of acute and cancer pain, but have been increasingly prescribed for chronic non-malignant pain, although, despite their increased use over more than a decade, there is still not sufficient evidence to support the efficacy and safety of their use for this purpose\(^1\).

As a result of promotion of opioid analgesics for the management of chronic non-malignant pain, there has been a substantial increase in supply in several Western countries, together with introduction of new opioids and new formulations. In Australia between 1997 and 2012, oxycodone and fentanyl supply increased 22-fold and 46-fold respectively. Oxycodone is now the seventh leading drug prescribed in general practice.

The harm to which medicines contribute is usually estimated as that occurring in a clinical context, but societal harm should also include that caused by non-medical use.

Because of the non-analgesic effects of opioid analgesics, they are among the leading causes of adverse drug events occurring in hospital, mostly as a result of nausea and vomiting, and opioid induced ventilatory impairment.

Misuse and addiction in the course of treatment of chronic pain is not uncommon. In a 2015 systematic review and data synthesis, Vowles et al describe that rates of misuse averaged between 21% and 29%, and rates of addiction averaged between 8% and 12%\(^2\).

As opioid supply increases, the risk of misuse, and intentional and unintentional poisoning has also increased. In the context of an increasing number of patients experiencing prolonged exposure to high doses of opioid analgesics, other non-analgesic effects on the endocrine, immune and gastrointestinal systems are becoming better described.

When the harm caused by increasing availability of opioid analgesics in both the medical and non-medical use is taken into account, it may be seen that opioid analgesics, because of their non-analgesic adverse effects and unique euphorigenic effects, may be among the most dangerous medicines in the Western pharmacopoeia.
