Response to the Opioid Epidemic

The American Dental Association (ADA) and the American Student Dental Association (ASDA) are committed to alleviating the tragic scourge of opioid abuse that has been devastating our communities. We welcome opportunities to work with Members of Congress on legislation that would:

- Require continuing education for opioid prescribers.
- Impose prescribing limits of no more than seven days for the initial treatment of acute pain.
- Support the use of prescription drug monitoring programs.
- Improve the quality, integrity, and interoperability of state prescription drug monitoring programs.

In 2016, opioids (including prescription opioids, heroin and fentanyl) killed more than 42,000 people — more than any year on record — and 40 percent of those deaths involved a prescription pain reliever, according to the CDC. This doesn't count the 1.8 million Americans (including 152,000 teenagers) who reported abusing or being dependent on prescription pain relievers, according to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration.

As a profession, dentists can do a lot to keep opioid pain relievers from harming our patients and their families. Among other things, we can be more judicious in our prescribing when alternative treatments are available. We can also make sure patients leave our offices knowing about the abuse potential and how to safely secure, monitor and discard them.

Since 2012, the ADA has offered free continuing education webinars on safe and effective opioid prescribing for dental pain. The ADA-produced webinars are free, convenient to access and tailored to pain management in dentistry. Additionally, participants are eligible for one hour of continuing education credit for each webinar completed.

The ADA also produced a clinical reference manual with techniques for managing dental pain for those who may be at risk for substance dependence. It covers the complexities of modern pain management in dentistry, including the nature of drug addiction, ways to screen patients for potential substance use disorders, and techniques for motivating at-risk individuals to seek appropriate treatment.

Additionally, the ADA has raised awareness about the misuse and abuse of opioid analgesics by partnering with many organizations, including the Partnership for Drug-Free Kids, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, the Drug Enforcement Administration, and the United States Surgeon General. We are now working with Congress to expand funding for the Comprehensive Addiction and Recovery Act and urging federal agencies to tailor their prescriber education and outreach.

In what could be the first of its kind among major healthcare professional organizations, the ADA adopted a policy that supports mandatory continuing education for opioid prescribers — with an emphasis on preventing drug overdoses, chemical dependency, and drug diversion. The ADA also supports limiting the dose and duration of initial opioid prescriptions for acute pain and the use of state prescription drug monitoring programs.

Dental students saw the need to address this issue while in school. This year, ASDA adopted policy that encourages dental schools to provide resources for students to appropriately address opioids with their patients. ASDA hopes to equip future practitioners with the initial skills they need to help combat opioid abuse.

The ADA and ASDA are committed to doing more to keep opioids from becoming a source of harm. Working together with other healthcare professionals, policy makers and the public, we believe it is possible to end this devastating and preventable public health crisis.

The ADA and ASDA look forward to working with Members of Congress on legislation to address this national public health crisis.

ADA Dentist and Student Lobby Day

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