

Alberta Alcohol and Drug Abuse Commission
POLICY ON ADDICTION AND MEDICATIONS
November 2007

POLICY STATEMENT

The Alberta Alcohol and Drug Abuse Commission (AADAC) recognizes that medications (prescription and over-the-counter drugs) are products intended to enhance the health and well-being of Albertans. As the government agency responsible for addiction services, AADAC provides information about the harmful potential of medications and offers a range of community-based prevention and treatment services that address medication misuse and abuse.

CONTEXT

1. Patient monitoring and advice on the safe and appropriate use of prescription and over-the-counter drugs is primarily the responsibility of medical and pharmaceutical professionals. Albertans also have a responsibility to make informed decisions about their use of various medications.
2. Harm to the health and well-being of individuals can occur through misuse and abuse of prescription and over-the-counter drugs. All medications have side effects and can be harmful if not used as directed. Some therapeutic drugs also have serious addiction potential. Misuse and abuse of prescription drugs has complicated origins that involve both prescribers and patients. Concerns about medications include inappropriate prescribing practices; diversion of medication to the illicit market through over-prescribing, “double-doctoring” or prescription forgery; and harmful patterns of use (e.g., use of prescription and over-the-counter drugs in excess quantities). Significant problems can also result from interactions with other prescribed medications, and with alcohol or illicit drugs.
3. Prescription drugs that are commonly abused include opioids (e.g., morphine, oxycodone), benzodiazepines and other sedatives, stimulants like Ritalin®, and performance-enhancing drugs such as anabolic steroids. Over-the-counter drugs that may be misused include antihistamines, diet aids and medications containing codeine. In addition, a variety of herbal products are used, but little is known about their therapeutic effectiveness, their interactions with other prescribed medications or their potential for abuse.
4. A number of prescribed drugs are used to treat mental health problems, which often co-occur with addiction. Many medications used to manage depression, schizophrenia and bipolar disorder have little or no abuse liability, and medically supervised treatment with these medications almost never constitutes drug abuse. However, adverse reactions may result when these drugs are mixed with alcohol, illicit drugs or other prescription drugs.
5. In 2005, 5.2% of Alberta students (grades 7 through 12) reported using stimulant drugs like Ritalin in the past year, and 4.1% reported that they had used depressant drugs such as tranquilizers, OxyContin® or Rohypnol®.¹

¹ The survey questions did not ask whether these drugs were used with or without a prescription.

6. Fewer AADAC treatment clients report concerns with their use of prescription drugs than report concerns with use of alcohol or illicit drugs like cannabis and cocaine.² Of clients who received treatment during 2006/2007, 10% reported concerns about their use of opiates, followed by tranquilizers (4%), antidepressants (3%), barbiturates/sedatives (2%) and amphetamines/stimulants (2%).

PRINCIPLES FOR ACTION

Information

AADAC will provide accurate and current information about misuse of prescription and over-the-counter drugs. In co-operation with health professionals, the commission will develop and distribute print materials and other resources to assist AADAC clients, staff and the public in acquiring knowledge and understanding of the benefits and risks associated with medication use, including those drugs used in addiction treatment as well as therapeutic drugs with abuse potential.

Prevention

AADAC will undertake or support prevention projects focused on the addictive potential of prescribed or over-the-counter drugs. The commission will work with physicians, pharmacists and other medical professionals to prevent harm associated with misuse or abuse of medications used to treat physical and mental health problems.

Prevention of problems related to use of prescription and over-the-counter drugs should include professional and consumer education, and restrictions on access to medications with significant potential for personal or social harm.

Treatment

People whose health or well-being is compromised by misuse or abuse of medication should have access to effective, ethical and compassionate care. This care should be guided by research and best practice standards.

In providing treatment for clients currently using prescribed medications, the commission will work with medical professionals to address individual client needs. Effective case management requires thorough client assessment and ongoing consultation with the client's physician to ensure therapeutic drugs are used appropriately and do not interfere with the client's ability to fully participate in addictions treatment.

Joint Initiatives

AADAC will continue to work with individuals, medical and pharmaceutical professionals, other government agencies and community groups to reduce the misuse and abuse of prescription and over-the-counter drugs. Partners may include the Alberta College of Pharmacists, the Alberta Pharmacists' Association, the Alberta Medical Association, the College of Physicians and Surgeons of Alberta and Alberta Health and Wellness.

² AADAC ASIST, 2006/2007 fiscal year-end statistics. Broad drug categories are used in ASIST, and it is not possible to separate street drug use from prescription drug use for certain drug categories (i.e., opiates, amphetamines/stimulants).

Legislation and Regulation

Legislation and regulation should be designed to ensure the availability and use of various medications that enhance or restore physical and mental health, while minimizing the harm that can result from inappropriate use.

AADAC supports the use of administrative systems (e.g., Alberta Triplicate Prescription Program and the Pharmacy Information Network) to monitor therapeutic drugs with addiction liability or potential for diversion to the illicit market. Routine review of the drugs monitored by these systems is required to ensure that drugs with addiction liability are prescribed cautiously.

Research

Well-conceived and well-executed research should be conducted into the prevention, treatment and prevalence of medication misuse and abuse. The results of such research should be communicated to health-care providers, to government and to the public to advance knowledge and influence positive change.

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