



College of Physicians and Surgeons of British Columbia

Communications Briefing Note

Safe Prescribing of Opioids and Sedatives

College position

The College is committed to addressing the risks associated with prescribing medications like opioids and sedatives, and ensuring these medications are prescribed safely and appropriately through practice standards and professional development workshops.

Key messages

- The goal of the College practice standard *Safe Prescribing of Opioids and Sedatives* is primary prevention of overdose, addiction, and other harms of the use of opioids and sedatives.
- The College does not prohibit prescribing of opioids and sedatives, nor does it set ceiling doses.
- The standard does not apply to active cancer care, end-of-life care, and management of substance use disorders; physicians are expected to follow relevant clinical guidelines and established best practices in managing patients with these conditions.

Background

Opioids and sedative medications have high-risk profiles. Historically, prescribing these medications has contributed to the rise in people living with substance use disorder (SUD).

The practice standard *Safe Prescribing of Opioids and Sedatives* (version 4.0 released in June 2018) has a long history and several iterations going back to 2012 when it was titled *Prescribing Principles*. The document has evolved from a guideline to a standard to reflect changing data and trends, and to emphasize the fact that the principles contained within it are mandatory, and not discretionary.

Several things have changed in BC, in particular, the emergence of an “opioid crisis” of staggering proportions. This opioid crisis has several dimensions, including an epidemic of SUD. The standard is aimed at primary prevention of all the risks and harms that can come from the use of prescription opioids and sedatives.

Ceiling doses

The College does not, and has never set ceiling doses on prescribing of opioids and sedatives. The College requires physicians to prescribe these medications after they have conducted a proper assessment, and have held documented conversations with patients. The standard does not prohibit the prescribing of opioids and sedatives, but is aimed at making such prescribing safer.

Each class of prescription medication may be appropriate for some patients. The key message contained in the practice standard is that physicians should take due care and consideration before either starting these medications or continuing them for long-term use, because of the risks involved for both the individual patient and the public at large.

In situations where these medications are initiated, the College directs physicians to do so appropriately. This means completing proper patient assessments, holding and documenting discussions with patients about the risks of the medications, taking full histories and learning about what other drugs patients are taking (illicit and prescription), reviewing patients' PharmaNet profiles, scheduling follow-up visits, advising patients not to mix opioids with alcohol and other substances, and tapering slowly and safely.

Tapering

The College has never supported inappropriate withdrawal of long-term prescription medications. The practice standard endorses a thorough discussion of benefits versus harms of long-term opioid and sedative use with patients. Where tapering to a lower dose (or to discontinuation) is the clinically appropriate course, physicians are advised to taper slowly to minimize physical and psychological withdrawal.

College intervention

The College does not take a disciplinary approach to ensuring that physicians are prescribing safely. The College's Prescription Review Program, which assists physicians with the challenging task of prescribing opioids and other drugs, is collegial, educational, and remedial.

Reference

- College Practice Standard: [Safe Prescribing of Opioids and Sedatives](#)
- Document: [Safe Prescribing of Opioids and Sedatives FAQs](#)
- Video: [An overview of the College's Safe Prescribing of Opioids and Sedatives practice standard released in June 2018](#)