

WorkSafeNB proposes changes to opioid rules

VANJA LAKIC TELEGRAPH-JOURNAL



WorkSafeNB's chief medical advisor Dr. Paul Atkinson outside the Crown corporation's Saint John headquarters.

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WorkSafeNB has proposed changes to the administration of opioids for patients recovering from workplace injuries.

As part of its 60-month policy review cycle, the board of directors has proposed four changes, including stricter monitoring, reducing the initial authorization of opioid prescription from six weeks to two weeks, limiting the dosages to a 50 mg morphine equivalent per day, and avoiding simultaneous prescriptions of opioids and sedating medications.

WorkSafeNB's chief medical advisor Dr. Paul Atkinson said opioids are only appropriate when absolutely necessary for the short-term treatment of acute pain such as injury, disease and surgery, and for terminal illnesses. The highly addictive narcotic, which alters brain function to reduce pain, is ineffective against chronic aches, Atkinson said.

The stakeholder consultation began on March 13 and will run until April 15.

North America's opioid crisis has reached alarming proportions in recent years contributing to more than 20,000 deaths in the United States, according to the American Society of Addiction Medicine, and nearly 2,500 in Canada in 2016, federal data shows. The epidemic has spiked demand for more emergency responders and healthcare professionals.

New Brunswick's opioid death rate was one of the lowest in Canada in 2016 with 4.2 deaths per 100,000 people. British Columbia's rate was the highest at 20.7, according to federal figures. While limited data is available for New Brunswick, Atkinson said there is "a significant number of people" on high opioid dosages.

"It's likely if we don't change our policies and guidelines in line with the general change to being more careful towards opioid prescription then we may follow into the footsteps of the larger provinces," he said.

The tighter guidelines call on physicians to follow up with patients after their two-week opioid prescription, and authorize an extended supply on a case by case basis only when mandatory.

As part of the board's proposal to impose stricter monitoring, Work-SafeNB intends to partner with universities, medical schools and the New Brunswick Medical Society to set safer opioid prescriptions and frequently track injured workers on opioids including their doses, medical costs and health changes.

"If their pain is improving we'll be ensuring that people aren't receiving prescriptions unnecessarily," Atkinson said.

The board's proposed amendments align with the New Brunswick College of Physicians and Surgeons' guidelines.

Atkinson's team is the primary sponsor of a course that instructs Dalhousie residents and practicing physicians on safer opioid prescriptions.

A Harm Reduction Symposium is scheduled for March 24 that will bring together clinicians, pharmacists and community organizers among others to discuss best practices.

Keynote speakers will be Dr. Marilou Gagnon, an Associate Professor at the School of Nursing, Faculty of Health Sciences, at the University of Ottawa and Director of the Unit for Critical Research in Health, and Donald McPherson, the Executive Director of the Canadian Drug Policy Coalition.

The symposium is open to the public for a \$25 registration fee. Space is limited.