HHS Announces Guide for Appropriate Tapering or Discontinuation of Long-Term Opioid Use

Today, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services published a new Guide for Clinicians on the Appropriate Dosage Reduction or Discontinuation of Long-Term Opioid Analgesics. Individual patients, as well as the health of the public, benefit when opioids are prescribed only when the benefit of using opioids outweighs the risks. But once a patient is on opioids for a prolonged duration, any abrupt change in the patient's regimen may put the patient at risk of harm and should include a thorough, deliberative case review and discussion with the patient. The HHS Guide provides advice to clinicians who are contemplating or initiating a change in opioid dosage.

“Care must be a patient-centered experience. We need to treat people with compassion, and emphasize personalized care tailored to the specific circumstances and unique needs of each patient,” said Adm. Brett P. Giroir, M.D., assistant secretary for health. “This Guide provides more resources for clinicians to best help patients achieve the dual goals of effective pain management and reduction in the risk for addiction.”

Clinicians have a responsibility to coordinate patients' pain treatment and opioid-related problems. In certain situations, a reduced opioid dosage may be indicated, in joint consultation with the care team and the patient. HHS does not recommend opioids be tapered rapidly or discontinued suddenly due to the significant risks of opioid withdrawal, unless there is a life-threatening issue confronting the individual patient.

Compiled from published guidelines and practices endorsed in the peer-reviewed literature, the Guide covers important issues to consider when changing a patient’s chronic pain therapy. It lists issues to consider prior to making a change, which include shared decision-making with the patient; issues to consider when initiating the change; and issues to consider as a patient’s dosage is being tapered, including the need to treat symptoms of opioid withdrawal and provide behavioral health support. For more information, go to: www.hhs.gov/opioids.

About the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Health

The Office of the Assistant Secretary for Health (OASH) oversees the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services’ key public health offices and programs, a number of Presidential and Secretarial advisory committees, 10 regional health offices across the nation, and the Office of the Surgeon General and the U.S. Public Health Service Commissioned Corps. OASH is committed to leading America to healthier lives.