

American Pain Society forced to close due to opioid scandal



A leading medical society in the USA has been forced to close this week amid allegations of its collusion in America's worst drug epidemic.

The American Pain Society is currently facing a number of lawsuits and has been issued multiple subpoenas as a result of its association with the opioid industry. It has been accused of corrupting its role as an independent medical advocacy organisation by helping to drive sales of narcotic painkillers on behalf of big pharmaceutical companies such as Purdue Pharma, from whom the society has received almost US\$1 million. All despite the undoubtedly beneficial progress the society has made in relation to pain research and treatment, especially for patients with cancer, who have chronic pain and are one of the biggest recipients of pain relief medications.

Initially cautious in their approach to opioid advocacy during the 1980s, the society issued an influential statement in 1996 claiming that opioids were safe and effective for the treatment of chronic pain, and that the risk of addiction was low. They will also be remembered by their landmark initiative to have patient pain treated as a fifth vital sign. On the one hand, this measure benefitted the patient population as it compelled medical professionals to prioritise pain treatment. Yet on the other hand, it led to patients requesting pain relief, since some doctors faced punitive measures if they did not treat pain and felt compelled to prescribe opioids even at a risk to patient health.

"People with chronic cancer pain are truly caught between national issues of opioid overuse versus pain undertreatment, all while coping with daunting amounts of pain",

commented Lara Traeger (Harvard Medical School, Boston, MA, USA). "We are finding that patients are now often trying to use their prescribed opioids more judiciously without always understanding the implications of skipping, delaying, or cutting down on their doses from day to day."

"Pain continues to be the most devastating problem for cancer patients", added Eduardo Bruera (MD Anderson Cancer Center, Houston, TX, USA). "Unfortunately the leaders of universities and medical schools have failed to establish structures and processes aimed at the alleviation of pain and suffering. We continue to assess pain and symptoms with patient reported numbers and our most effective drugs for pain are between 80 and 220 years old. More research and education are desperately needed."

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For more on the **closure of the American Pain Society** see <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2019/may/25/american-pain-society-doctors-painkillers>