Discouraging Conclusions on Initial Opioid Prescriptions

To the Editor:

In a manuscript published in the New England Journal of Medicine, Zhu et al (1) have provided information on initial opioid prescriptions among U.S. insured patients with a decline of 54% to 68%, accompanied by a decrease in providers. However, authors have inappropriately concluded that a subgroup of providers continue to write high risk initial opioid prescriptions. Multiple factors may be at play for these prescriptions. Further, the journal also published multiple manuscripts in reference to adverse effects of curtailing opioid prescriptions: as structural iatrogenesis (2) and ill effects of opioid use disorder and incarceration (3). The CDC report (4) through 2017 shows no change in death rate related to prescription opioids, whereas, there was astronomical increase related to deaths related to synthetic opioids (Fig. 1). Therefore, a significant contribution to the current opioid epidemic includes fentanyl and heroin (5). Reframing prevention strategies must be linked to true causes. Thus, while we should not take our eye off of prescription opioid issues, at the same time, we should not exaggerate the newly developing issue of curbing opioids for medically necessary patients which in turn may be contributing to heroin and fentanyl epidemic.

Laxmaiah Manchikanti, MD  
Clinical Professor  
Anesthesiology and Perioperative Medicine  
University of Louisville, Kentucky  
Professor of Anesthesiology-Research  
Department of Anesthesiology, School of Medicine  
LSU Health Sciences Center  
Co-Director  
Pain Management Centers of America  
67 Lakeview Drive  
Paducah, KY 42001  
E-mail: drlm@thepainmd.com  

Alan D. Kaye, MD, PhD  
Professor, Program Director, and Chairman  
Department of Anesthesiology  
Louisiana State University Health Science Center  
1542 Tulane Ave, Room 659  
New Orleans, LA 70112  
E-mail: akaye@lsuhsc.edu

Joshua A. Hirsch, MD  
Vice Chair and Service Line Chief  
Interventional Radiology  
Chief of NeuroInterventional Spine Director  
Interventional Neuroradiology  
Massachusetts General Hospital  
Associate Professor of Radiology  
Harvard Medical School  
55 Blossom St., Gray 241B  
Boston, MA 02114  
E-mail: jahirsch@mgh.harvard.edu

Fig. 1. National Drug Overdose Deaths—Number Among All Ages, 1999-2017.  
Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Health Statistics. Multiple Cause of Death 1999-2017 on CDC WONDER Online Database, released December, 2018.
REFERENCES


