

# Maine earns B in pain management

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Maine's policies for treating people suffering from long-term chronic and terminal pain rank above the national average, a report released Tuesday showed.

But improvements are needed, say the report's authors and state interest groups.

In the study, conducted by the University of Wisconsin Medical School's Pain and Policy Studies Group, Maine earned a "B" grade for its success in getting the right drugs to patients who need them while preventing prescription drug abuse.

Maine was one of 11 states that scored above a "C+." Four states scored higher than Maine did. None of the 50 states earned an "A" or "F."

While many states improved their grades over the past three years, Maine's stayed the same.

"It's not bad," said Gordon Smith, spokesman for the Maine Medical Association. "But we still have a ways to go."

He said the relatively good grade reflects strides Maine officials have made over the past five years aimed at improving pain treatment policies.

During that time, the state has undertaken a new program called Educating Physicians in End-of-Life Care, in which doctors are trained in prescrib-

ing narcotic medications. Also, a law enacted in January requires that doctors use a new type of medical prescription pad that is difficult to forge or alter.

And law enforcement authorities are now at work on installing a statewide computer system that will flag duplicate prescription requests for strong narcotic drugs.

These changes should help Maine doctors feel more secure about prescribing the drugs their patients need, Smith said.

Kandoyce Powell, executive director of the Maine Hospice Council and the Maine Pain Initiative said the report is "a very

fair assessment" as well as a "thorough" one.

Although Maine health-care providers have been tackling pain issues for a "solid 10 years," there is plenty of room for improvement, she said.

"On any given day, 50 or 60 percent of people experiencing pain are not having their pain managed effectively to make them comfortable," she said.

Powell said doctors remain fearful that they might be criminally prosecuted or sued for over prescribing narcotics. A recent spike in reports of OxyContin abuse has only fueled those fears.

"There's still and always will

remain a degree of insecurity and fear about Big Brother looking over your shoulder," she said.

But strides have been made in that arena also.

Maine Attorney General Steven Rowe is collaborating with Powell's group to better educate state prosecutors about end-of-life issues, including prescribing pain medication.

Cheryl Tucker, Maine spokeswoman for the American Cancer Society, said it's important for doctors to balance their fears of overprescribing drugs with the needs of their patients.

"As we confront the problem

of prescription drug abuse in our state, we must also make sure that medicines used to treat pain are available to patients suffering from pain," she said.

Because none of the states earned an "A," the report's authors concluded there is much more that could be done.

The nation in general "remains behind the ideal in providing consistent, balanced policies that ensure the availability of pain-relieving drugs for patients in need while controlling the misuse of such substances," the report states.

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