



Ein cyf/Our ref EM/1480/22

Joel James MS  
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Dear Joel,

During the debate on community pharmacy in plenary on 30 March, you brought to my attention the rise in opioid prescribing in the last 10 years. I am pleased to be able to share with you further detail on the growth in opioid prescribing and to outline the strategies we have in place to address inappropriate prescribing of opioids.

Rightly, there are significant concerns regarding the widespread use of opioid analgesics particularly for the management of non-cancer pain. Opioids are associated with significant short and long term adverse effects and are liable to diversion and misuse. Reducing the unnecessary and inappropriate prescribing of opioids in Wales has been a priority for a number of years.

In common with other countries, Wales has seen an increase in opioid prescribing. Prescribing data confirms a rise in the number of opioid analgesic prescriptions of around 33% over the 10 year period 2009/10 to 2019/20. An [analysis](#) of prescribing in England demonstrated a similar increase over the same period. Opioid prescribing in Wales reached its highest point in 2016/17, however since that time the number of prescriptions for opioid analgesics in Wales has decreased every year. In 2020/21, the number of prescriptions for opioids was 3.1% lower than the number in 2016/17.

In addition, health boards have made good progress to reduce the use of stronger and more problematic opioids that are associated with diversion and illicit use. Since 2016/17 the numbers of prescriptions for tramadol have decreased by 27.3%; a reduction of more than 130,000 prescriptions for tramadol every year. Similarly, prescriptions for high strength opioids decreased by 15.8%, demonstrating a move away from strong to weaker opioids.

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Rydym yn croesawu derbyn gohebiaeth yn Gymraeg. Byddwn yn ateb gohebiaeth a dderbynnir yn Gymraeg yn Gymraeg ac ni fydd gohebu yn Gymraeg yn arwain at oedi.

We welcome receiving correspondence in Welsh. Any correspondence received in Welsh will be answered in Welsh and corresponding in Welsh will not lead to a delay in responding.

Improvements in prescribing are underpinned by our broader strategy to support people with chronic pain. In April 2019, we published [Living with Persistent Pain in Wales \(gov.wales\)](http://gov.wales). The guidance aims to support the management of services, provide greater understanding of the different approaches available for the management of persistent pain, and encourage health and social care professionals to use optimal approaches when offering care and management to anyone living with persistent pain. National Clinical Leads for Persistent Pain have recently been appointed to help support the implementation of the principles within our *Living with Persistent Pain* guidance and to support services as we recover from the impact of COVID-19.

Prescribing of opioids is one of three priority areas within the National Prescribing Indicators (NPIs) endorsed by the All Wales Medicines Strategy Group (AWMSG). The aim of our opioid prescribing indicators is to encourage the appropriate use and review of opioids in primary care; minimising the potential for dependence, diversion, misuse and adverse drug reactions.

Thank you for bringing this matter to my attention. I hope this provides some useful context regarding the opioid prescribing in Wales and offers reassurance that we recognise the importance of improving, and are acting to improve, prescribing in this area.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'M. E. Morgan'.

**Eluned Morgan AS/MS**

Y Gweinidog Iechyd a Gwasanaethau Cymdeithasol  
Minister for Health and Social Services

Cc: Health opposition spokespeople