

PAIN MANAGEMENT IN CRISIS!

Alicia Smith took her own life on March 16 because she couldn't stand the chronic pain any longer.¹ When federal agents arrested her physician, Dr. William Hurwitz, Alicia couldn't find anyone else willing to prescribe the large dose of opiates she needed to survive.

All over the country patients with chronic pain say they are having trouble finding adequate and proper medication. This is a public health catastrophe that cries out for reform.

Because prescription medicine now ranks number two among drugs most abused by adults and young people, the federal government plans to dramatically ramp up enforcement, ostensibly going after doctors who do not follow "sound medical practice".² Doctors have become so gun shy that the Association of American Physicians and Surgeons now advises its doctors not to prescribe opiates at all.³

The medical profession itself is part of the problem. In medical school, doctors get little if any training in pain management, so they either under-medicate or avoid chronic pain patients altogether. Patients with legitimate need for heavy medication, victims – of cancer, bone disease, botched surgery, etc. – seek out those few doctors like William Hurwitz who are willing to help. This raises a red flag for law enforcement since these doctors seem to be prescribing heavy doses for too many patients.

Pain management specialists should be policed by other pain management specialists – not law enforcement officers.



DEA officials deny that their campaign has a chilling effect on physicians, saying they take action in only a few hundred cases a year. But the physicians don't see it that way. "It only takes one person to get guillotined for everyone to get the message," says Robert Mills, spokesman for the AMA.⁴

When chronic pain patients become desperate, they inevitably turn to the black market for additional medication, or they are forced to "game the system" by seeking duplicate prescriptions.

Congress and the medical profession must work out a solution for the millions of Americans who are living with chronic pain and cannot obtain appropriate relief. Pain management specialists should be policed by other pain management specialists – not law enforcement officers.

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1. Not her real name. 2. Office of National Drug Control Policy, 2004 Strategy Report. 3. Los Angeles Times Oct 20 03, "Painful Rift." 4. Drug Enforcement Report, Dec 23, 2003, "DEA Addresses Complaint."