Abstract
Dealing with pain is an inevitable sequela to dental treatment. Although several drug regimens primarily involving narcotics have been used in the past, availability of nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) has increased recently. A study was conducted to analyze dental prescribing patterns for analgesics. Data analysis of a survey of 130 dentists revealed that respondents still rely on narcotic analgesics for pain relief and generally exceed needed potency and quantities in their prescribing habits. Dentists are treating rather than preventing pain, and NSAIDs are underused.

Do dentists prescribe narcotics excessively?

Providing good dental care entails preventing and alleviating disease and pain. When some dental services are rendered, immediate or posttreatment discomfort is inevitable. To allay pain, anesthetics are used during treatment, and anesthetics and analgesics are used after treatment. Many pharmacological choices are available for mitigating pain. In 1987, acetaminophen (Tylenol) with codeine was the sixth most frequently prescribed new and refilled prescription medication.1 By 1993, because of increased popularity of other analgesics, Tylenol with codeine had fallen to 32nd place.2 During this time, nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) increased in popularity. Thoughtful decisions concerning pain management are in the best interest of patients and practitioners and can be made without compromising patients' comfort.

Excessive use of narcotic analgesics is a problem. Abuse of heroin (introduced in the United States as a nonaddictive analgesic in 1898) was partly responsible for the first Food and Drug Act of 1906. Legislative attempts at drug control have been numerous, including: The Harrison Narcotic Act of 1916; Food, Drug, and Cosmetics Act of 1938; Durham-Humphrey Law of 1952; Kefauver-Harris Bill of 1962, and Drug Control Amendments of 1965. The Controlled Substance Act of 1970 provided statutory control of narcotics and other addictive agents. Under this law, only practitioners who are registered with the Drug Enforcement Agency may order controlled substances. Yet, up to 15 percent of the medications from controlled substance prescriptions are sold on the street; one third of all drugs sold illegally are prescription drugs.4 The reason for the great demand for prescription drugs is product quality. Because prescription drugs are concentrated and pure, they are preferred to illegally manufactured or processed drugs. For example, a tablet of hydrocodone (Dilaudid), which costs about $1 in a pharmacy, may be sold for more than $75 on the street.5

The availability of prescription medications on the street is attributed partly to prescribing practices of some dentists. The question "Am I contributing to the local drug market?" must be considered whenever a controlled-substance prescription is written. Prescription-drug traffickers can be deceptive, manipulative, or abusive, and use a number of ruses.6,7

Pain management is a topic of perennial interest to dentists. They prescribe analgesics most frequently among medications.8,9 Pain was relieved 100 years ago with various forms of ethanol and opium. Around 1900, the first nonnarcotic analgesics (notably acetylsalicylic acid [aspirin]) became available. Since then, other compounds with great range in analgesic potency have been developed. The advent of NSAIDs opened another area of pain control. The era when dentists routinely prescribed a dozen Empirin No. 3, Tylenol No. 3, or Percocet tablets is concluding. The scope of traditional analgesic therapy during that era was treating symptoms. Now, when properly administered before and after treatment, NSAIDs can provide complete relief by interrupting pain generation. Dionne described an approach to analgesic therapy in-
volving the advantages of NSAIDs and narcotics. In other reports, the efficacy of NSAIDs or their superiority over narcotics in alleviating pain is substantiated.

Some patients are prepared psychologically to accept only narcotic analgesics. Dentists are responsible for informing them about the advantages of alternative therapies—which do not produce the pharmacologic side effects of narcotic analgesics (such as respiratory depression, sedation, nausea, psychological changes, and dependence). Operating motor vehicles and machinery should be avoided when narcotic analgesics are used, but not when NSAIDs are used. Few reports have been published about the prescribing habits of dentists. Such information should be obtainable by survey or personal communication, and the authors were interested in determining whether traditional narcotic analgesics are preferred over NSAIDs as a means of controlling posttreatment pain.

**Methods**

At a state dental convention, a survey was conducted to analyze dental prescribing patterns for analgesics. Questions were based on routine dental procedures performed by general dentists. Dentists were asked to read each question and respond appropriately by writing prescriptions that they would write most commonly in three situations—involving severe, moderate, and mild pain. By analysis, analgesics were grouped into NSAIDs (including aspirin), acetaminophen, and narcotics (including combinations with aspirin, acetaminophen, or other drugs such as sedatives).

**Results**

Survey results are presented in the Figure.

**Discussion**

Respondents rely most on narcotic analgesics for pain relief. The most commonly prescribed narcotic was a brand of hydrocodone and acetaminophen, perhaps due to hydrocodone's potency (Schedule II, telephone-order prescribing) and good marketing. Hydrocodone's black-market popularity and value should make dentists more cautious in prescribing this product. To prevent complaints from patients, respondents wrote prescriptions that exceeded the needed potency and quantities, e.g., 24 oxycodone-acetaminophen doses after a simple tooth extraction. Classifying pain and prescribing for need rather
than convenience may curb substance abuse. In a random examination of prescriptions written by dentists for Medicaid patients, a Drug Utilization Review Board (DUR) found that 53 percent of prescriptions written by dentists were for narcotics, and that narcotic prescriptions are repeated for the same clients several times. In the DUR study, prescriptions exceeded the potency needed for most dental procedures.

Prescribing patterns for narcotic use and quantities differ for the three theoretical cases. In the majority of cases, pain medications need not be prescribed for more than 48 hours. Some practitioners use strong analgesics rather than customize the dosage (i.e., prepare patients prophylactically). Even with dentists' highest interest in providing adequate pain control, reports about pain control and information from pharmaceutical manufacturers indicate that dentists are not improving nor updating pain-control techniques.

The origin and perception of pain involve a complex mechanism that is complicated further by psychological components. Most dental pain is mild to moderate and is controlled adequately by NSAIDs, which are believed to act peripherally. Thus, NSAID therapy is an alternative to narcotics. Dentists with improved technical approaches and skill can reduce trauma. They can prevent pain by administering NSAIDs, which are highly effective when used to their best advantage. A therapeutic NSAID plasma level before onset of pain greatly increases effectiveness. Maintaining this level, rather than administering analgesics when pain recurs, offers the most effective pain control. The action of the NSAID prevents formation of prostaglandins involved in pain generation and transmission. Long-acting local anesthetics that supplement initial local anesthesia may eliminate or diminish the need for analgesics following treatment. Most students in a remedial pharmacology course for dentists who have abused their narcotic prescribing privilege, and lost their state controlled-substance license, kept patients pain-free with NSAIDs during the period in which narcotics could not be prescribed. The number of NSAIDs from several chemical classes offer choices in potency, time of onset, duration of action, and cost. Prescribed intelligently, NSAIDs keep patients pain-free with minimal side effects, and without sedation, respiratory depression, or dependency.

Conclusions
Narcotic analgesics are the most common pain medications prescribed. Some respondents prescribed up to 24 doses of strong narcotics following simple tooth extraction, which could be excessive. Dentists are treating rather than preventing pain. NSAIDs are underused in prevention and treatment of pain to eliminate the objectional side effects of narcotics. We do not suggest that narcotic analgesics never be used, but point out that adequate analgesia for mild to moderate pain can be achieved with nonnarcotic agents. Careful prescribing prevents excessive use, abuse, and illegal diversion of narcotics.

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References