

# PAIN TOPICS

## What is Pseudoaddiction?

Thomas E. Quinn, MSN, RN, AOCN

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Pseudoaddiction is the term for an iatrogenic syndrome that appears to mimic behaviors that are commonly believed to be associated with addiction. It may present in a patient with or without a history of or risk factors for drug abuse or true addiction. It usually occurs with acute pain, including acute pain that is overlaid on a chronic pain condition. It is characterized by a climate of distrust and conflict between the patient and the care team related to the use of opioids for pain. Its etiology is pain that is inadequately treated, leading to patient demands for opioid analgesia that are interpreted by the care team as being excessive. The result is a progressive cycle of patient complaints of inadequate pain relief, sometimes accompanied by exaggerated pain behaviors, and care team resistance to providing opioids, sometimes compounded by avoidance and isolation of the patient.

In published case reports of pseudoaddiction, the patient's report of pain is not believed, despite the presence of a progressive disease or painful condition, or the potential for tolerance due to prior opioid use is not taken into consideration by the care team. Inadequate analgesia is therefore inevitable due to either a dose that is too low or a dosing interval that is too long. There is a tendency in such cases to provide even less analgesia, further exacerbating the problem. In the case of Pseudoaddiction, "drug seeking" behavior is incorrectly interpreted as evidence of addiction; it is more accurate to see it as "relief seeking" behavior.

The "treatment" for pseudoaddiction is to redesign the analgesic regimen so that analgesics are provided at an appropriate dose and dosing interval. Ongoing and thorough pain assessment with corresponding adjustment of dose (i.e., titrating to effect), as with any patient, is essential. Frank discussion with the patient about the goals of pain treatment and the care team's concerns are key to re-establishing a therapeutic relationship between the patient and the care team. As David Weissman puts it, "pseudoaddiction is something that we do to patients through our fears and misunderstanding of pain, pain treatment, and addiction. . . Any time there is a suggestion, because of escalating pain behaviors, that a patient on opioids may be 'addicted,' pseudoaddiction should be ruled out."\*

To learn more about pseudoaddiction, see (cited articles are available in Treadwell Library; *Journal of Palliative Medicine* is also available free online via [MAGIC](#) on MGH computers)

1. Kowal N. What is the issue: pseudoaddiction or undertreatment of pain? *Nursing Economics* 1999;17(6):348-349
2. Porter-Williamson K, Heffernan E, Von Gunten CF. Pseudoaddiction. *Journal of Palliative Medicine* 2003;6(6):937-939
3. Weissman DE, Haddox JD. Opioid pseudoaddiction--an iatrogenic syndrome. *Pain* 1989;36(3):363-366
4. Weissman DE. Understanding pseudoaddiction *Journal of Pain and Symptom Management* 1994;9(2): 74
5. \*Weissman DE. Pseudoaddiction. [http://www.eperc.mcw.edu/edматы/detail.cfm?matl\\_id=333&query\\_id=&srchType=edматы&secSrchType=fastFact&sessn\\_id=5849682845650567882571529](http://www.eperc.mcw.edu/edматы/detail.cfm?matl_id=333&query_id=&srchType=edматы&secSrchType=fastFact&sessn_id=5849682845650567882571529) (free registration required at <http://www.eperc.mcw.edu>, then click on 'Fast Facts and Concepts' and navigate to #069, Pseudoaddiction). Accessed 18 Jan 2004.

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