

Vital statistics data can help fill gap about prescription opioid-related deaths

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A new study indicates that Statistics Canada data could be used to estimate the number of prescription opioid-related deaths in Canada to aid in national surveillance of this important public health issue by provincial and national public health agencies.

Public health officials in the United States track deaths from prescription drugs at the national level on a regular basis, allowing them to quickly identify and report on the rising trends of opioid overdoses across the country, said Tara Gomes, a researcher in the Li Ka Shing Knowledge Institute of St. Michael's Hospital and a scientist at the Institute for Clinical Evaluative Sciences.

"In Canada, our knowledge of the prevalence of prescription opioid-related deaths is restricted to localized estimates obtained with varying methodologies," she said in a paper published online today in the *Canadian Medical Association Journal*. "To help find solutions to this growing and complex [public health](#) crisis, accessible, nation-wide data sources to examine prescription opioid-related harms in Canada are desperately needed."

Opioids are medications that relieve pain and include such drugs as oxycodone (e.g., OxyContin, OxyNeo, Percocet), morphine (e.g., Kadian, MS Contin), hydromorphone (Dilaudid, Hydromorph Contin) and codeine.

Gomes and colleagues abstracted data from the Office of the Chief

Coroner of Ontario to identify all deaths from prescription opioid overdoses from January 2003 to December 2010 in the province of Ontario. However, she noted the process of abstracting such data from coroners' records is time- and resource-intensive, and therefore not practical when attempting to identify deaths across Canada.

Statistics Canada's Vital Statistics death database also captures causes of [death](#) in Canada. Since both databases are housed at ICES, the researchers were able to apply a series of algorithms to test the validity of the Statistics Canada definitions. In their paper published today in CMAJ, they report for the first time that the Statistics Canada data can be used to estimate rates of opioid-related deaths nation-wide with high specificity.

More information: *Canadian Medical Association Journal*,
www.cmaj.ca/lookup/doi/10.1503/cmaj.150349

Provided by St. Michael's Hospital

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