

Hydromorphone potency may drive more misuse

Neil Bramwell

A SHARP rise in prescription of hydromorphone in Queensland has prompted a warning for GPs to exercise caution when starting patients on high-potency opioids.

Hydromorphone, a semi-synthetic primary opioid agonist that is up to eight times more potent than morphine, has a high misuse potential,

the Australasian Professional Society on Alcohol and Other Drugs conference was told in Melbourne last week.

Data from the Queensland prescription monitoring program revealed that since extended release hydromorphone was listed on the PBS in 2009, prescribing had increased 12-fold.

Increasing hydromorphone use was evident in people admitted to opioid treatment programs (OTPs), and appears to be equivalent to fentanyl use in particular regions, according to Bill Loveday, manager of the drug dependency unit at Queensland Health.

Nearly 800 people aged 60–69 years, including those

in OTPs, were using hydromorphone in 2012. Most prescriptions were for appropriate long-term management of non-cancer pain, but there was also anecdotal evidence of drug-dependent people seeking hydromorphone for injecting use.

“We don’t have sufficient evidence to prove that hydromorphone has been involved in overdoses or deaths, but these results suggest it is emerging as another pharmaceutical opioid drug of misuse,” Mr Loveday said.

“GPs should exercise caution and look for support from appropriate specialists before initiating people on high-potency preparations, especially when patients come with a history of drug misuse.”

