



# Iowa City VA Health Care System

# NEWS RELEASE

Valerie Buckingham, Public Affairs Officer  
(319) 339-7104  
(319) 631-0735 cell  
FAX: (319) 339-7135  
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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:

## **VA study first to assess Veterans' exposure to opioid therapy prior to hospitalization**

**IOWA CITY** – Opioid therapy has become increasingly common for hospitalized non-surgical patients, raising questions about safety, quality of care, and long-term outcomes.

In a study of all Veterans with acute medical admissions to 129 Veterans Affairs (VA) hospitals in the United States, VA researchers found that 25.9 percent had received chronic opioid therapy in the six months prior to admission. The VA researchers' study is the first to examine a Veteran's opioid exposure *prior* to hospitalization and how this is associated with hospital outcomes.

The findings were published online December 6<sup>th</sup> in the Journal of Hospital Medicine.

"Our findings suggest that we need to change how we think about pain and pain relief during medical hospitalization," said lead author Dr. Hilary J. Mosher, a Hospitalist at the Iowa City VA Health Care System (ICVAHCS).

"Much of the pain we are treating in the hospital may be complex and longstanding. Medical models of acute pain may not apply to patients with prior chronic non-cancer pain and long-standing opioid use."

The study included the 122,794 veterans who were hospitalized in a VA Medical Center during fiscal years 2009 to 2011. Of these, 31,802, or 25.9 percent of Veterans, had received prior chronic opioid therapy. The study defined this as a prescription for 90 or more days of opioids within six months preceding hospital admission. Within this group of patients, 18,082 or 56.9 percent had received prescriptions for 180 days or more. A total of 257,623 opioid prescriptions were provided to Veterans during this time period.

Patients receiving chronic or occasional opioids were more likely to experience 30-day hospital readmission, an effect that remained after adjusted for demographic variables and

selected comorbidities. The patients who received chronic opioid therapy had an almost 20 percent increased risk of death during the hospitalization or within 30 days.

During the time of the VA study, over half of Veteran inpatients had pre-existing chronic non-cancer pain at the time of admission and 45.5 percent had prior opioid exposure. This important finding will help refine expectations and strategies for continuing to provide Veterans with quality care.

“To better care for Veterans in the hospital,” said Mosher, “we need a better understanding of their pain and opioid exposure, and to examine if what we do to treat pain in the hospital effects the pain experience after hospital discharge.”

This study was funded by the Health Services Research & Development Service, Veterans Health Administration, U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. The VA, which has the largest integrated health care system in the country, also has one of the largest medical research programs. This year, approximately 3,400 researchers worked on more than 2,300 projects with nearly \$1.9 billion in funding.

For more information on this study or to schedule an interview, contact Valerie Buckingham, Public Affairs Officer at (319) 339-7104.