



**Media Release**

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***Outdated Regulations Across Europe Hinder Appropriate Access to Opioid Medications  
for Pain***

**Expert Group Calls for Government Action to Break the Barriers that Impact Patients' lives**

Disparate and outdated Government policies and regulations on the use and prescription of opioids contribute to the inadequate treatment of pain across Europe, according to a new report, presented to the members of the European Parliament today.

The “White Paper on Opioids and Pain: A Pan-European Challenge”<sup>1</sup> has been produced by the **Opioids and Pain European Network of Minds** (OPEN Minds) group, and provides an insight into the regulatory situation in 17 European countries which cause negative opinions and stigma of opioids.

The OPEN Minds White Paper reveals that, in every country in Europe, prescriptions for strong opioids must be filled in differently from those for other medicines. A large number of European countries demand strong opioid prescription forms are different to those for other medicines, and, in some cases, complicated triplicate forms must be filled in. In many countries, doctors must travel in person to regional offices to obtain the forms needed to prescribe strong opioids, and in some even pay for these forms themselves.

Even the language and terminology used to describe these medicines is negative in many European countries. For example, in Germany, the group of all narcotics including opioids are referred to as “Betäubungsmitteln”, literally “the means to knock you out”, whilst in Austria, prescription forms are known as “Suchgiftrezepte”, or “addictive poison prescription forms”.

These unnecessary regulations reinforce an outdated viewpoint associating these medicines with addiction, abuse and death, despite considerable evidence showing the efficacy of their use in managing chronic pain.

“One of the primary healthcare goals for all countries should be the provision of appropriate treatment for people suffering from chronic pain. This means ensuring adequate access to opioid medicines, a situation which this research demonstrates is not universal across Europe”, explained Professor Eckhard Beubler, Institut für experimentelle und klinische Pharmakologie, Universität Graz, Austria and current Chair of the OPEN Minds group.

This situation is compounded by a misperception amongst members of the public with regards to the effects and risks of these medicines, and a stigma around opioid medicines which existing regulations do little to alleviate. Additional research<sup>2</sup>, surveying public opinion and attitudes around opioids and strong pain killers, alarmingly reveals one in five members of the European public have experienced a negative reaction when they have told someone they are taking a strong pain killer. 30 percent of European respondents reported having a different opinion of opioids compared to other strong pain killers, with 45 percent explaining they would feel worried if one of their family were prescribed an opioid, despite the proven benefits these medicines can have. The research also hints at an additional factor impacting on the public's opinion – of those questioned, only four percent felt the media painted a positive picture of opioids, with nearly half (44%) reporting that they felt the media reported opioids in a negative light. These results reinforce the need for European Governments to lead the way in providing accurate information with regards to opioids to reduce unfounded fears, misunderstandings and stigma.

The lack of economic provisions for chronic pain treatment is an additional factor leading to some European governments failing to make available the drugs proven to treat chronic pain. The OPEN Minds white paper reveals for example in some countries there is no reimbursement for non-cancer pain and in others, the choice of opioid medication is severely restricted. In addition to reimbursement issues, nearly 500 million working days are lost to Chronic Pain every year – costing the economy €34 billion across Europe.<sup>3</sup> Add to this the jeopardisation of patients' careers due to their chronic pain, cost of carers, impact/cost on family members and psychological implications due to pain, the economic impact of barriers to opioid prescribing becomes clear.

“Chronic pain is a major European healthcare issue”, explained Professor Margarita Puig, Dept of Anaesthesiology, Hospital Universitario del Mar, Barcelona, Spain, and member of The OPEN Minds group. “The ‘White Paper on Opioids and Pain: A Pan-European Challenge’ illustrates the extent to which legal, regulatory, cultural and economic factors impede upon the treatment of chronic pain across Europe. Most importantly, the research illustrates a fundamental misunderstanding of the impact of pain and the important role that strong opioids play in the management of chronic pain”, she continued.

#### *ENDS*

For further information regarding The ‘*White Paper on Opioids and Pain: A Pan-European Challenge*’, the OPEN Minds Group, or for an electronic copy please visit [www.openmindsonline.org](http://www.openmindsonline.org). Alternatively, please contact:

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## **Notes to Editors**

### ***‘White Paper on Opioids and Pain: A Pan-European Challenge’***

A comprehensive questionnaire was sent to 35 physicians in 17 European countries to seek preliminary information about regulations governing opioid prescription, reimbursement policies and driving status for patients. An expanded set of questions was delivered via interviews with other 32 European physicians. Responses were cross-referenced against governmental official documents, with the subsequent results, disparities and issues presented within the White Paper.

### ***About the Public Perceptions of Opioids and Strong Pain Killers***

A recent survey was carried out on behalf of the OPEN Minds group to ascertain the public's perceptions of current pain management and to identify the specific misconceptions that exist in Europe today. The survey, conducted via internet panel, collated results from 1,000 respondents across five countries in Europe (UK, Germany, Spain, Sweden, Italy). A summary of the key findings from this research, including breakdown by country, is included within the research background document.

### ***About the OPEN Minds Group***

OPEN Minds (Opioids and Pain European Network of Minds) is a pan-European group comprising of 26 leading pain management specialists from 16 countries.

The group is committed to helping healthcare professionals increase their knowledge and understanding in managing pain, in order to address concerns about using opioids to treat chronic pain and thereby raising the standards of pain management across Europe.

An online resource “OPEN Minds online” ([www.openmindsonline.org](http://www.openmindsonline.org)) was launched by the group in October 2004, providing healthcare professionals with educational information and recommendations based on both existing clinical guidelines and the group's collective practice-based experience to help address these issues.

## **References:**

1. ‘White Paper on Opioids and Pain: A Pan-European Challenge’. The OPEN Minds Group, June 2005
2. Public Perceptions of Opioids and Strong Pain Killers. Research by Light Speed Research on behalf of the OPEN Minds group, May 2005
3. Pain In Europe ([www.painineurope.com](http://www.painineurope.com))

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