CDC clarifies opioid prescribing guideline, says doctors should use their 'clinical judgment'

by Joanne Finnegan | FierceHealthcare
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Under pressure from healthcare experts, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has clarified the controversial federal guideline for prescribing opioids, which it issued three years ago in the face of the opioid epidemic sweeping the country.

In a letter (PDF) released publicly Tuesday, the CDC said the guidelines were not intended to deny chronic pain patients relief from opioids and encouraged physicians to use their “clinical judgment” in prescribing the medications, which can be addictive. The letter also spoke specifically to the use of opioids in the treatment of cancer and sickle cell patients, making it clear the guideline was not meant to limit access to pain management for patients with these conditions.

The Feb. 28 letter was written by Deborah Dowell, M.D., chief medical officer at the CDC’s National Center for Injury Prevention and Control. Addressed to leaders at three medical organizations, the letter was embargoed for release until Tuesday morning.

It was written to the National Comprehensive Cancer Network, the American Society of Clinical Oncology and the American Society of Hematology and came, the organizations said, as a result of a collaborative effort to have the government agency clarify the guideline to ensure safe and appropriate access for cancer patients, cancer survivors and individuals with sickle cell disease.

The CDC issued its guideline in March 2016 in an attempt to curb widespread opioid abuse that claimed 20,000 U.S. lives in the previous year alone. The guideline was intended for primary care clinicians and advised them to prescribe treatments other than opioids for chronic pain outside of active cancer treatment, palliative care and end-of-life care.