



## BULLETIN:

# DOCTOR WHO CHAMPIONED USE OF OPIOIDS FOR CHRONIC PAIN NOW SAYS “IT WAS THE WRONG THING TO DO”

Dr. Russell Portenoy, a prominent physician who is a past president of the American Pain Society and past director of the American Pain Foundation, has shaken much of the pain medicine community with recent statements published in the [Wall Street Journal](#) on December 17, 2012.

Dr. Portenoy has long been one of the most influential voices urging the use of opioids for patients with chronic non-cancer pain, arguing that these constitute a safe and effective therapy. In a surprising about-face, he was quoted in the WSJ article as admitting that he “gave innumerable lectures in the late 1980’s and 90’s about addiction that weren’t true.”

His frequently quoted claim that only 1% of the population is at risk for opioid addiction actually came from a brief report on hospitalized patients given a brief course of opioids. In the WSJ article, Dr. Portenoy acknowledged that this information was not relevant for patients with chronic non-cancer pain, even though he portrayed it as such in multiple lectures and publications. Dr. Portenoy’s influence is reflected in the dramatic growth in opioid prescriptions over the last 20 years. Sales of opioids now exceed \$9 billion a year.

More than 16,500 people die of opioid overdoses annually at this time, more than from all illegal drugs combined.

The CDC estimates that health insurers spend more than \$72 billion each year on direct medical costs related to the *non-medical* use of prescription opioids. Reflecting on the soaring rates of addiction and overdose deaths attributable to the influence of Dr. Portenoy and other advocates of opioids, he stated, “it was clearly the wrong thing to do.”

Beyond the issue of the dangers of opioids, Dr. Portenoy acknowledged that their use in chronic pain does not even have a legitimate scientific basis. “Data about the effectiveness of opioids does not exist,” he said in the WSJ interview.

Moreover, Dr. Portenoy

acknowledged that there is little research to show whether patients on long-term opioids will ever be able to stop using these. As a result, physicians are now placed in the dilemma of having to manage patients who may have enormous difficulty discontinuing the use of highly addictive substances of known risks and questionable benefit.

Dr. Portenoy has had financial relationships with over a dozen drug companies over the years, most of those involved in the production and marketing of opioids. He and Beth Israel Medical Center in New York, where Dr. Portenoy is chairman of pain medicine and palliative care, have declined to provide details of their funding by pharmaceutical companies.

It is known that as of 2007 his program had received millions of dollars over the preceding ten years in funding by opioid makers, including Endo, Abbott Laboratories, Cephalon, Purdue Pharma, and Johnson & Johnson.

The financial ties between pharmaceutical companies and the doctors and groups that

advocated broader use of opioids has recently come under investigation. The Senate Finance Committee opened an investigation in May of this year and asked the opioid manufacturers to disclose how much money they had paid Dr. Portenoy, his program, and several organizations with which he was involved. One of those organizations, the American Pain Foundation (APF), was instrumental in producing guides for patients, policymakers and journalists that played down the risks of opioid painkillers and promoted their benefits. It was found to have received 90% of its funding from the drug and medical device industry in 2010. Shortly after the investigation was launched, the board of directors disbanded the APF.

A related question is whether and how this investigation, and Dr. Portenoy's new statements, may affect efforts to change the FDA's guidelines for the use of opioids. We direct the interested reader to our September newsletter (there is a link on our [website](#) under News and Articles), which summarized the arguments brought forth by the Physicians for Responsible Opioid Prescribing (PROP) and

the opposing position paper produced by the American Pain Society (once presided over by Dr. Portenoy).

Please note the following link from NBC's Today Show on December 31, 2012 as well: [Today Show, 12/31/2012.](#)

We will continue to follow these important developments as they unfold, particularly given the tremendous relevance they have for injured workers who develop chronic pain, and whose care may potentially involve the use of opioids with all their attendant risks and concerns.

We at The Rehab Center continue to champion an interdisciplinary approach to the management of chronic pain, recognizing and addressing the various medical, psychosocial, and behavioral, components of this debilitating condition.

For further information on The Rehab Center and our programs and services, please see our website: [www.TheRehabCenter.com](http://www.TheRehabCenter.com), or call us at (704) 375-8900. To subscribe to our newsletters and bulletins, please e-mail [jriley@TheRehabCenter.com](mailto:jriley@TheRehabCenter.com).