



May 11, 2014 - For immediate release - Morphine and other opioid medicines provide effective pain relief for patients with cancer or other chronic pain. However, in many countries of the world oral morphine is not available, while in others, even if available, patients may not be able to afford it.

(Houston TX) – The International Association for Hospice and Palliative Care (IAHPC) has launched Opioid Price Watch (OPW), a project to monitor and report the dispensing price of opioids around the world. This project is as a component of the agreement of work as an NGO in formal relations with the World Health Organization (WHO). This project was funded with a seed grant from the US Cancer Pain Relief Committee.

To work on this project, IAHPC formed a working group which included board members of IAHPC, and external advisors from the field. IAHPC developed and implemented a pilot to test OPW and report the information collected on the availability, prices and affordability of 5 opioids (fentanyl, hydromorphone, methadone, morphine, and oxycodone) in 13 formulations. The pilot project has been completed and a report published in the [Journal of Pain and Symptom Management](#). The report is available free to all (Open Access). The published report presents data on availability, dispensing prices and affordability submitted by 30 participants from 26 countries.

Using the data on availability and dispensing prices, IAHPC calculated the affordability of a one 30 day treatment of morphine and developed a flash map housed in the [IAHPC website](#)

IAHPC plans to continue nurturing the OPW map as a living project that the palliative care community can nurture and participate in.

The report findings were consistent with findings published in other studies on the limited availability of opioids around the globe where the vast majority of the population lives. But it also presents findings which were unexpected:

In regards to its international reference price the median price of a morphine immediate release tablet (10mg) is almost 6 times higher in low and middle income countries (LMIC) than in high income countries (HIC). Hydromorphone and oxycodone were the highest-priced medications. However, in 3 countries some oxycodone formulations were priced lower than morphine and/or methadone. Results also show an unexpected favorable price difference for fentanyl transdermal patch: it is free in five countries and the cheapest one in seven, indicating that there are heavy subsidies in place at all GNI levels.

It would be useful to find out the reasons why morphine, which is cheaper in the international prices than other medications, is not included in subsidy programs, even in LMIC. Artificially lowering the dispensing price of the most expensive medications and formulations results in less



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efficient use of limited resources, an economic disadvantage for morphine IR, and probably also in less demand for this medication.

The palliative care resolution which will be presented to the next World Health Assembly in Geneva, urges governments to take the necessary steps to ensure access to essential medicines, especially opioid medications. Morphine is included in the WHO Model List of Essential Medicines. Patient advocates and the civil society also play an important role. The [Morphine Manifesto](#), launched by Pallium India in collaboration with other NGOs brings attention to this issue.

Dr. Roberto Wenk, Director of the OPW project and Past IAHPIC Chair remarked: *“This is the first international study that presents and compares data on opioid prices at the dispensing level and the affordability of morphine treatment for patients around the world. With the collaboration of our members, OPW will serve as monitoring tool for the global palliative care community.”*

Dr. Lukas Radbruch, Chair of IAHPIC and coauthor of the report commented: *“OPW is in consonance with the call for action to recognize access to medicines as human rights in the [Prague Charter](#). We hope that the published report will increase awareness on the difficulties that patients face trying to access medicines for pain treatment.”*

Dr. Tania Pastrana, one of the coauthors, stated: *“The results of OPW support existing data on the limited availability and access to medicines for pain treatment. It also shows that many countries more expensive formulations are subsidized while cheaper ones have to be paid by the patients. We hope that the report will bring attention to this issue so that corrective measures are taken”*

Ms. Liliana De Lima, executive director of IAHPIC commented: *“We are very grateful with the US Cancer Pain Relief for the seed grant, the IAHPIC members who participated and reported the prices of the opioid medications, with Dr. Willem Scholten for his guidance, the WHO Department of Essential Medicines for their support, and all the board members and advisers which made OPW possible. This is an ongoing project and IAHPIC members are invited to participate in this exciting opportunity”*

IAHPIC members interested in participating in the OPW will have some benefits. To inquire more and learn how you can be part of this project, contact Ms. [Ana Restrepo](#), Operations Officer

About IAHPIC

The International Association for Hospice and Palliative Care (IAHPIC) is a not for profit organization that works to improve the quality of life of adults and children with life-threatening conditions and their families, by advancing hospice and palliative care programs, education, research, and favorable policies around the world. For more information, please visit our [website](#).