Common Misconceptions about Opioids

**Truth:** The opioids may appear to have stopped working when in reality, an increase in dose is needed.

- The most common reason is that the disease is progressing, and there is a change in the level of pain experienced by the patient.
- Another reason is **tolerance,** which means that increasing doses of medication are needed to achieve comfort for the patient. Tolerance does not develop suddenly. If the person no longer gets pain relief at one dose level, it can be increased.

**Myth:** People who take Morphine always need more and more medication.

**Truth:** Just because a person needs an opioid medication such as morphine to control their pain does not mean that they are gravely ill or near death. Opioids are very effective medications that can be used at any stage in the disease trajectory when severe pain requires strong medication.

**Myth:** People who need medications like Morphine for pain control are always very ill and near death.

We prefer to use the term “opioid” instead of narcotic when talking about this class of pain medications. Narcotic is a term used by media and law enforcement agencies and encompasses a wide variety of drugs. Often people associate the word narcotic with illegal drugs and addiction. The word “opiate” refers only to those medications produced from natural poppy alkaloid. Opioids include natural (made from poppies), and synthetic (man-made) pain medications.

Source: St. Michael’s Hospital Palliative Care Unit (2008). Some common myths about morphine…and other opioids. Toronto, ON: St. Michael’s Hospital.