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Health Professions Licensing Boards Issue Rulings on the Management of Pain

Boston, MA – The Massachusetts Boards of Registration in Nursing, Physician Assistants, Pharmacy and Dentistry have all recently issued policy rulings on the Management of Pain. The rulings which affect approximately 140,000 licensed healthcare professionals across the state, including nurses, pharmacists, dentists and physician assistants, were adopted by the boards to insure patient access to appropriate, effective pain assessment and management. The Massachusetts Division of Health Professions Licensure has taken the unprecedented step of having all four boards of registration adopt policies using a collaborative, multi-disciplinary approach over a seven week period to focus attention on the hidden epidemic of pain which adversely affects thousands of Massachusetts citizens and has serious physiological, psychological, social and economic consequences.

“By adopting these important policies, the Boards are directing licensees to practice in accordance with the most up-to-date standards of care for pain management. Doing so will promote health and safety of Massachusetts pain sufferers and improve their quality of life while reducing the frustration, harmful effects and costs associated with untreated or inappropriately treated pain” said Jean Pontikas, Director of the Division of Health Professions Licensure within the Massachusetts Department of Public Health. The standards for appropriate and therapeutic pain management, which are based on the licensee’s scope of practice, include: knowledge of a patient’s pain management plan with appropriate pharmacological and non-pharmacological treatments, and the use, when appropriate, of controlled substances including opioid analgesics in the management of all pain types. Also included are adherence to system safeguards designed to minimize the potential for abuse and diversion when controlled substances are used, interdisciplinary consultation and collaboration, and culturally sensitive patient, family and caregiver education.

Pain has become a national public health crisis and is the number one reason Americans seek medical care. Fifty million Americans suffer from chronic pain from illnesses such as cancer, diabetes, AIDS, arthritis, migraines, sickle cell and from serious injuries like back pain, RSD/CRPS and repetitive strain injuries and another 25 million suffer with acute pain. Yet repeated studies have shown that pain is undertreated and most people suffering with severe pain do not have it under control. Treatments are available today to manage or greatly ease most pain to tolerable levels so people should not have to suffer needlessly. Pain experts cite the lack of knowledge about pain assessment and management among healthcare providers as a common barrier to effective pain treatment.

“The most common complaints we hear from patients suffering with debilitating pain is the large number of healthcare providers they were forced to consult with before they found a provider knowledgeable enough to properly diagnose and manage their pain, if they ever do”, stated Cindy Steinberg, Legislative Council Chair for the Massachusetts Pain Initiative (MassPI) and Board Member and Massachusetts State Power Over Pain Action Network Leader for the American Pain Foundation. “We are extremely pleased that the Boards have recognized the profound impact pain has on the citizens of the Commonwealth and have taken a leadership role in establishing these critical standards of pain care for the large number of healthcare professionals affected by these rulings.”

The Massachusetts Pain Initiative has worked collaboratively with the Division of Health Professions Licensure to bring these policies to fruition and has developed a roll out plan in concert with the Boards. The plan includes communication of the rulings to licensees through professional association newsletters, web sites and publications and continuing education training programs in pain management for healthcare professionals offered around the state taught by MassPI pain management professionals. MassPI is also developing programs for healthcare professionals to announce the new rulings and provide education on the latest evidenced-based practices for the assessment and management of pain. The new policy rulings can all be found at www.masspaininitiative.org or on the licensing board web sites which can be accessed at www.mass.gov/dph/boards

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The Massachusetts Pain Initiative is a statewide, non-profit organization dedicated to ending needless suffering from pain and to improving the quality of life for all people affected by pain. Its membership is largely healthcare professionals across the state—nurses, doctors, social workers, pharmacists, psychologists and also pain sufferers and caregivers who are interested in helping people with pain. MassPI is a member of the Alliance of State Pain Initiatives, a national network of similar state-based organization. For more information please visit www.masspaininitiative.org.

The Division of Health Professions Licensure within the Massachusetts Department of Public Health protects the public health, safety, and welfare of Massachusetts citizens by licensing qualified health care professionals, and developing, implementing, and enforcing regulations and policies that assure and promote safe practices. Through partnerships with organizations that advocate for patients, among others, the Division enhances its ability to ensure quality care to achieve better outcomes for patients.