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Indicted pain doc attacks charges

She calls on federal law enforcers instead to work with doctors to keep narcotic prescription drugs out of the hands of addicts and abusers.

[ANNE T. DENOGEAN](#)

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A Tucson doctor indicted in March on federal charges of overprescribing narcotic painkillers says the Drug Enforcement Administration should ease up on physicians doing their best to help Americans who live with debilitating pain.

It's important to prevent opioid drugs from getting into the hands of those who abuse them, acknowledged Dr. Jeri Hassman. But, she said at a news conference yesterday, "You cannot ignore there are millions of people who suffer severe and chronic pain."

Instead of targeting doctors, the DEA should work with them to identify "drug-seeking" and "doctor-shopping" patients, she said.

Tony Ryan, spokesman for the DEA in Tucson, said the agency would not comment on an open investigation.

Hassman, a pain-management specialist, faces 66 charges alleging she prescribed painkillers to six patients without a legitimate medical reason. The drugs included morphine, methadone, Vicodin and OxyContin, schedule II narcotics that have addictive properties and can be abused.

Hassman also is charged with scheming to defraud TRICARE, a managed health-care program for retired members of the U.S. military and their dependents.

Yesterday's news conference was organized by the Association of American Physicians & Surgeons, a professional association headed by Dr. Jane Orient of Tucson that is supporting Hassman.

Among others who attended to support Hassman were the immediate past president of the Arizona Medical Association, Dr. Richard Dale; another Tucson pain-management specialist who will be an expert witness for Hassman, Dr. Jennifer Schneider; and several other doctors.

"She may be very empathetic or even naive, but I think she took good care of her patients," Dale said.

About a dozen patients in attendance passionately defended Hassman, describing her as caring and conscientious.

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Don Hayden, 48, said his chronic pain from a shattered ankle and a subsequent infection was so great that he was bedridden most of the time and contemplated suicide. Three years ago, he found Hassman.

"She prescribed the proper pain medication to make me a functioning member of this society," Hayden said.

Several of the patients complained they've had difficulty getting the medications they need from other doctors since Hassman's certificate to prescribe controlled substances was suspended.

Orient said her association got behind Hassman because it believes the DEA has turned the war on drugs "into a war on doctors." She provided a list of 32 doctors from around the country who have been indicted or convicted on charges related to their prescribing of pain medications.

Some victims of chronic pain need prescription narcotic painkillers for the long term to be able to function. But Orient said doctors all over, including her colleagues in Tucson, are becoming more reluctant to prescribe the painkillers, because of fear of prosecution.

"If this continues, if you or a loved one develops chronic pain, you may not be able to find anyone who is willing to prescribe these lifesaving medications for you," she said.

Orient and Hassman said the DEA could work cooperatively with doctors to prevent people who abuse prescription drugs or sell them on the street from obtaining those drugs. Law enforcement should set up a notification process to advise physicians of suspicious behavior by patients, such as using more than one pharmacy or having contact with known dealers or addicts, they suggested.

Doctors could provide training on cutting-edge treatments so law enforcement better understands changing attitudes in medicine toward pain treatment, they said. What wasn't considered appropriate a few years ago in terms of volume and duration of pain-drug use has changed.

They also said there should be joint reviews of potential cases against doctors before charges are filed so that doctors aren't ruined by the charges.

Hassman said she has spent more than \$100,000 defending herself and expects the final cost to be about \$500,000. She said her employees have taken pay cuts to keep her practice going.

She is being investigated by the Arizona Medical Board, and two malpractice suits were filed against her after the indictment. She said she is confident the malpractice suits will be resolved in her favor.

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