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Opioid Addiction, a Major Public Health Threat in Atlanta, Often Overlooked and Untreated

-- Resources on private office-based treatment available for Atlanta consumers --

Richmond, VA (May 31, 2006) – Opioid addiction in Atlanta is a growing public health concern that affects people from all walks of life. According to recent government reports, the number of people in Atlanta who misuse prescription opioid painkillers such as oxycodone, hydrocodone, and morphine is rising, and an estimated additional 7,000 Atlantans are addicted to heroin. Local addiction specialists report that many Atlanta doctors have difficulty recognizing opioid painkiller dependence and that they have a low awareness of treatment options. As a result, although more people are being admitted to Atlanta emergency departments in connection with opioid dependence, the number who enter treatment programs for this disease has remained stagnant. From a public health perspective, this means that a growing number of Atlanta citizens are not receiving the treatment they need for a potentially life-threatening chronic disease.

Atlanta's problems reflect a national public health crisis – according to the most recent *National Survey on Drug Use and Health (2005)*, published by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), approximately 4.4 million teens and adults nationwide reported using prescription opioid painkillers for nonmedical purposes. In addition, in terms of new users, in 2004 more people abused opioid pain relievers for the first time than any other drug, including marijuana and cocaine, and opioid painkillers are the most heavily abused substance among teens and young adults. An estimated 1.5 million more Americans abuse heroin.

Many people do not fully understand the danger of misusing opioid painkillers. A national survey of the public's perceptions of opioid addiction, *Prescription Painkiller/Heroin Addiction and Treatment*, revealed that nearly half of the US public does not know that misusing prescription opioid painkillers is as harmful to the body, and fully as addictive, as heroin abuse.

“Dependence on opioids is a serious and growing health concern right here in metropolitan Atlanta,” said Dr. Tommie Richardson, Addiction Medicine Specialist, Ridgeview Institute. “Whether the addiction is to prescription painkillers or heroin, opioid addiction affects every socioeconomic segment in the city. A major obstacle to a

patient's treatment is the difficulty many physicians have in recognizing dependence on prescription painkillers – and even when they diagnose the problem, many do not know how to treat it. Opioid addiction is a chronic disease, like diabetes or hypertension, that can affect anyone. The good news is that it can now be treated medically, just as we treat other long-term conditions.” It is now possible for any doctor to take the training to become certified to treat opioid dependence in his or her private office using an FDA-approved medicine. Many patients prefer the privacy, convenience, and discretion that office-based treatment offers. “More Atlanta doctors are now becoming certified to treat opioid dependence in their offices, which should help us catch up in responding to this public health threat.”

Resources For Opioid Dependence and its Treatment

Addiction to opioids is defined as a long-term brain disease by the World Health Organization and the National Institute on Drug Abuse. It is a treatable medical condition that is caused by changes in the chemistry of the brain. This dependence can start with use of medicine that a doctor prescribes for serious pain but that a person continues to use after the medical need for pain relief has passed. Or it may begin as recreational drug use that spins out of control.

Individuals who need more information about opioid dependence and its treatment, either for themselves or for someone they are concerned about, have several options. Educational materials on opioid dependence are available to answer questions about this often-misunderstood disease and the treatments that are available for it. To receive a free educational Resource Kit on these topics, visit turntohelp.com or call **1-866-455-TURN**, both provided by Reckitt Benckiser Pharmaceuticals.

Additionally, the non-profit patient advocacy group NAABT – National Alliance of Advocates for Buprenorphine Treatment – is dedicated to helping educate the public on opioid dependence and treatment in a private doctor's office. “Increasingly more people are contacting NAABT for information on opioid dependence and treatment,” said Timothy Lepak, president of NAABT. “This is a disease that does not discriminate. It affects people from all walks of life and all socioeconomic and demographic levels.”

For more information on Atlanta physicians who can prescribe medicine to treat opioid dependence in a private medical office, visit naabt.org. SAMHSA's Web site also provides a physician locator and other valuable information at buprenorphine.samhsa.gov.

In the United States, Suboxone® (buprenorphine HCl/naloxone HCl dihydrate) C-III Sublingual Tablets and Subutex® (buprenorphine HCl) C-III Sublingual Tablets are the only controlled medications under the Drug Addiction Treatment Act of 2000 approved by the FDA for treatment of opioid dependence in a doctor's office. Suboxone and Subutex are manufactured by Reckitt Benckiser Pharmaceuticals.

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