The May 6 article, “Thousands of NC Doctors Are Over Prescribing Opioids Despite a New State Law” uses a foundation of flimsy facts to build a story casting physicians in an unnecessarily negative light and ignoring the positive steps being taken to stem the toll of the opioid abuse epidemic in North Carolina.

Many of our physician members sadly have seen the ravages of opioid misuse among their patients. Knowing that positive change needed to occur, the North Carolina Medical Society (NCMS) fully supported the STOP Act, which limits what physicians can prescribe for their patients’ pain. We, along with the NC Medical Board and many other organizations, have been working to educate physicians about the new law as well as the larger issues around prevention and treatment of opioid use disorder.

Halting the opioid crisis is a complex and multi-faceted undertaking. Clinicians, ordinary citizens and insurance companies are all experiencing a dramatic culture change around the use of opioids. How the NC Department of Health and Human Services and the NC Medical Board identify violations and enforce the new law is still evolving. Unfortunately, the article is based on data that may not accurately reflect whether the prescriptions in question were appropriate or not – contrary to the article’s main message of massive disregard for proper prescribing.

Thankfully, many of the initial indicators reveal that progress is being made. The article did not reflect that physicians are rapidly making the shift in how they treat both acute and chronic pain as they become aware of the new law and take the required education courses on opioid prescribing. BCBSNC’s own raw data show the trend is moving in the right direction, with a full 25 percent reduction in total prescriptions written above STOP Act limits since the end of 2017. This reflects the growing awareness and education about the STOP Act legislation among physicians and PAs, and, if this trend continues, we hope to see minimal numbers of such claims by the end of this year.

Physicians have owned their past role as part of a pharmaceutical philosophy that endorsed ‘safe’ opioids to meet what we now know were unreasonable and, at times, harmful expectations for pain relief. By oath, physicians’ primary responsibility is the welfare of their patients. To intimate, as the article does, that thousands of physicians are flouting the law to the detriment of their patients is simply ridiculous.

To truly address this crisis requires positive action on many fronts, not finger-pointing or stoking fears of unlawful behavior. We question what public need this article filled since it didn’t even have facts as its basis.

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