The estimated number of emergency department (ED) visits involving the misuse or abuse of pharmaceuticals increased significantly from 2004 to 2009, according to data from the Drug Abuse Warning Network (DAWN). Nearly 630,000 ED visits in 2004 were related to the misuse or abuse of pharmaceuticals, compared to more than 1.2 million in 2009. In 2009, approximately one-half (48%) of these pharmaceutical misuse or abuse visits involved pain relievers,* and more than one-third (35%) involved drugs to treat insomnia and anxiety. In contrast, the number of ED visits involving illicit drug use was relatively stable over the same time period (see figure below). There were 973,591 ED visits related to the misuse or abuse or illicit drugs in 2009, primarily for cocaine (43%) and marijuana (39%). According to the authors, these findings highlight the “importance of heightening emergency room medical staff’s awareness of nonmedical use of pharmaceuticals, because these personnel might be the first responders to people in need of intervention and treatment” (p. 7).

*The 2009 National Survey on Drug Use and Health (NSDUH) found that 14% of U.S. residents reported lifetime nonmedical use of prescription pain relievers (see CESAR FAX, Volume 19, Issue 45). In addition, treatment admissions involving pain reliever abuse increased fourfold from 1998 to 2008 (see CESAR FAX, Volume 19, Issue 28).