

Media release

Wednesday 11 October 2017

Pharmacy Guild risks patient safety on codeine issue

The Rural Doctors Association of Australia (RDAA) has joined other medical stakeholder groups in strongly supporting the Therapeutic Goods Administration's (TGA) decision to 'up-schedule' codeine products.

The decision will mean that, from February 2018, patients will require a prescription for medications containing codeine.

"RDAA is calling on the Federal Government to continue to back the TGA's decision, despite pressure from the Pharmacy Guild to make exemptions to the requirement for a prescription" RDAA President, Dr Ewen McPhee, said.

"The TGA's decision has very clearly been made in the best interests of patient safety, and it has been made with extensive consultation from medicines experts.

"We see this as the critical first stage of a two stage process to significantly improve patient safety around codeine use.

"The implementation of a compulsory and legislated national Real Time Prescription Monitoring system — enabling doctors *and* pharmacists to track prescriptions for individual patients in real time — is the crucial second stage that should be introduced as soon as possible.

"There is significant evidence on the dangers of misusing codeine, and on the ease with which patients can become addicted to codeine, that makes the TGA's decision absolutely the correct one.

"For rural and remote communities, issues relating to drug addiction — not only of illegal substances but also to medications such as codeine — have a significant impact on patients and their families.

"Additionally, many rural and remote communities have very limited resources to support patients to access the help they need to beat their addiction. For a rural patient, often this means substantial time away from home and family.

"RDAA previously met with the Pharmacy Guild to understand what they are proposing in relation to their protocols regarding the dispensing of codeine without prescription. Unfortunately to-date we have not been consulted on the protocols and how these would apply in rural and remote communities.

"We have noted with interest comments made by the Pharmacy Guild that making access to codeine products via prescription only, for rural towns in particular, would be problematic due to limitations in patients being able to access a GP, particularly after-hours.

"What the Guild fails to mention, however, is that in many rural towns, pharmacies do not work extended trading hours anyway.

"The Guild also argues that, in towns where there is no doctor or a doctor shortage, patients may not be able to access codeine for temporary acute pain associated with conditions like headache, toothache or period pain.

"We would hope that the Guild supports the need to put the safety of rural patients at the highest level — we believe that, on balance, it is more important that rural patients are properly assessed by a trained doctor for their condition, before they are given codeine for a condition that may not require it. In many cases, there may be more appropriate and just as effective alternative medicines with lower risk for the patient.

"Most rural and remote patients want to see their GP before taking more significant pain medication, and have their condition diagnosed and appropriately treated by their GP. And in a large number of remote towns, the GP also dispenses medication as there is no local pharmacy.

"The TGA's decision is very clearly in the interests of patient safety — we strongly urge the Federal Government to hold its position in relation to this issue."

For more information on codeine, visit the Codeine Information Hub established by the TGA:

www.tga.gov.au/codeine-info-hub

A high resolution photo of Dr Ewen McPhee can be found here:

www.rdaa.com.au/sites/default/files/public/pictures/Dr Ewen McPhee.jpg

Available for interview:

RDAA President, Dr Ewen McPhee (via Patrick Daley — limited availability on Wednesday)

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