

**To Community Pharmacists, for onward
cascade to all healthcare staff within the
pharmacy**

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Dear Colleague

Over the Counter Medicines – Potential for abuse and misuse

The availability of over-the-counter (OTC) medicines from community pharmacies as a treatment option is welcomed both by patients and by healthcare providers beyond pharmacy. However, it is well-recognised that some OTC medicines have potential for misuse, abuse and harm. Medicines associated with this potential include:

- Sedative antihistamines
- Laxatives
- Compound Analgesics containing codeine or dihydrocodeine
- Oral Decongestants
- Kaolin and Morphine
- Cough Preparations containing codeine

Compound codeine analgesic preparations are a cause for particular concern, with a rising number of individuals presenting to both acute hospitals and addiction services with serious health problems as a result of the excessive paracetamol and ibuprofen intake associated with abuse of such formulations.

Pharmacists should ensure all staff selling are aware of the potential for abuse/misuse of OTC medicines and have procedures in place to deal with requests that may be associated with this. A consistent approach should be taken by all staff in your pharmacy, and for this reason locum pharmacists should also ensure they are familiar with the pharmacy policy.

Professional responsibilities

PSNI Standards¹ outline a number of professional responsibilities related to this issue:

- All persons involved in the sale of OTC products should be aware of the abuse potential of certain OTC medicines, and know that they should refuse to make any supply where there are reasonable grounds for suspecting misuse or abuse
- Staff should be alert to requests for large quantities and abnormally frequent requests and inform the pharmacist
- Promotions for medicines aimed at the public must not encourage inappropriate or excessive consumption or use of medicines, or promote their misuse
- Pharmacists should not seek to persuade patients to obtain medicines that are not needed, or quantities substantially in excess of those needed
- Pharmacists should control the safe and effective supply of medicinal products

In addition to the PSNI Standards, the MHRA discourages companies and retail suppliers of medicines from undertaking any volume-based promotion which includes any products containing analgesics that could encourage unnecessary purchases of medicines and put consumer safety at risk².

Managing Requests

It is fully recognised that dealing with this issue within the pharmacy is challenging. An individual who systematically visits every pharmacy in an area can often be viewed as a 'problem customer' rather than a 'patient with a problem'. Conversely, a long-time regular patient who appears to be supplementing their prescriptions with OTC medications can present a very sensitive situation.

Identifying the reason behind the misuse can be a starting point, allowing advice to be provided on the health risks and alternative means of managing the route cause. Where there is suspected dependency or other health concerns, the patient should be advised to see their GP. The pharmacist should consider raising the issues with the patient's GP.

¹ www.psni.org.uk/about/code-of-ethics-and-standards/

² www.gov.uk/government/publications/blue-guide-advertising-and-promoting-medicines

Information on local drug and alcohol services in each Trust area can be found at www.publichealth.hscni.net/publications/drug-and-alcohol-directories-services .

Wider Issues

Some areas have reported recreational abuse of OTC preparations by young people in the locality. This often takes place in open-air areas, in a similar manner to under-age drinking or solvent abuse. Be particularly aware of repeat purchases of the same product in a short period of time and consider alerting other pharmacies in the area if necessary.

Large purchases or theft may be for use in manufacturing illegal drugs, for example pseudoephedrine can be converted to a form of amphetamine. This is not commonly encountered in Northern Ireland but if you are suspicious of such purchases contact the Police Service of Northern Ireland on the 101 non-emergency telephone number.

In addition to measures within pharmacies, DHSSPS Medicines Regulatory Group (MRG) officers and the HSCB will monitor purchases by pharmacies of medicines liable to abuse, including OTC preparations. Pharmacists may be asked to account for any apparent excessive quantities.

Yours Sincerely



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