Queensland Health

Public Health Alert

Dear Doctor,

Potential workload impacts from codeine re-scheduling

What is changing?
In December 2016, the TGA announced that over-the-counter medicines containing low-dose codeine will become prescription only from 1 February 2018. Products affected include cold and flu remedies and combination analgesics, such as Panadeine, Nurofen Plus and Mersyndol, as well as generic brands.

Why are these changes occurring?
The low dose of codeine available over-the-counter provides no more pain relief than products with paracetamol or ibuprofen alone. There is little need for low-dose codeine, especially when there are safer and more effective options available to help manage cold and flu symptoms and pain, both pharmacological and non-pharmacological.

Because codeine is an opioid medicine in the same family as morphine, it can be highly addictive and long term regular use can lead to tolerance, dependence, toxicity and in high doses, death.

The National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre indicated that the rate of codeine related deaths in Australia more than doubled between 2000 and 2009, driven primarily by an increase in accidental overdoses.

Much of the toxicity from excessive use of codeine related products comes from the co-formulated ingredients, particularly paracetamol and ibuprofen. Overdose of paracetamol can result in liver damage and long term or high dose ibuprofen use can lead to internal bleeding, kidney failure, elevated blood pressure, heart attack and stroke. Long term use of opioids can make chronic pain worse by causing hyperalgesia.

Why are these likely impacts for general practice?
1) You may experience more drug seeking behaviours from previous high dose OTC codeine users seeking supply or an alternative opiate.

2) You may see patients with unanticipated withdrawal in previous moderate codeine users. This would predominately present as headaches, abdominal pain and/or diarrhea.

3) You may see more patients wanting assistance with acute pain management issues.

Where can I get help or more information?

Yours sincerely

Steven Donohue MBBS (Melb), DTM&H, DHSM, DPH, FAFPHM
Director & Public Health Physician
Townsville Public Health Unit
44336900