

Pain of codeine addiction a real problem, writes Leah Dwyer

Leah Dwyer, The Daily Telegraph

December 27, 2017 9:30pm

MAKE no mistake — the commonly used pain medicine codeine is an over-the-counter killer. With new laws soon to make codeine prescription-only, some argue these pills aren't really that dangerous.

They would have us believe the number of people misusing codeine isn't significant enough to matter. And they're suggesting people living with chronic conditions will be put through further pain when, from early next year, we'll need to see a doctor to access the drug.

Recently in these pages it was suggested the effects of codeine misuse were minimal. Nothing could be further from the truth. More than 100 Australians die each year from codeine overdose, according to Painaustralia. Of those deaths, a third are people living with chronic pain.

So the current system is failing people living with pain — ordinary people like me. Thankfully, I had a wake-up call. About nine months ago I learnt that codeine is addictive and potentially deadly and that there are effective non-addictive medications.

I had taken codeine for seven years, even though I knew I shouldn't be taking it long term, after an accident left me with a neuromuscular condition called dystonia in my neck.

Along with ongoing pain, I have painful muscle spasms and a constant head tremor. Over the years, I kept thinking my condition would get better, but it didn't.

I went to the pharmacy looking for what I thought was a safer alternative. Codeine was quick and easy and I could buy it anywhere.

I ended up taking 12-14 Mersyndol tablets every day. Around the same time that I was having concerns about my codeine use, I also found out I would soon need a prescription from my GP to keep using it. This news motivated me to make a very important change for my long-term health. I was addicted without knowing it.

Stopping codeine gave me the chance to make better choices for my health. I've now learnt to manage my pain with non-pharmaceutical strategies such as massage, exercise and cognitive behavioural therapy.

I'm trying to replace Panadol with magnesium and B8 — and my ultimate goal is to not be taking anything.

The Therapeutic Goods Administration is making codeine a prescription drug from February.

From the perspective of someone who is living with pain, and has unwittingly misused painkillers, this change can't come soon enough.

But people living with chronic pain, like me, do need support. If codeine is no longer available over the counter then we need accessible and alternative treatment.

Leah Dwyer lives with chronic pain and supports finding alternatives to codeine use. Painaustralia is lobbying the federal government to establish an action plan to ensure people with chronic pain like Leah have access to the treatments they need.