

Codeine user says price hike will turn pain sufferers to illegal drugs

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A GEELONG woman who relies on Nurofen Plus for severe pain management has criticised pharmacies for charging dispensing fees for the prescription-only drug.

Jane, who didn't want to give her full name, said she believed people who could not afford the extra fee will turn to illegal drugs and alcohol to treat their pain.

Forty-one brands of low-dose codeine products remain available in Australia but consumers now require a doctor's prescription to access the pills which are not subsidised on the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme.

Pain Management Australia chief executive officer Carol Bennett said since codeine was taken off the shelves on February 1 pharmacies could charge a \$7 dispensing fee for all codeine.

"It's up to the chemist to decide if they charge the fee," Ms Bennett said.

The price concerns come after Royal Australian College of General Practitioners Victoria chair and Lara GP Dr Cameron Loy told the *Geelong Advertiser* people will "transition to street purchase of pharmaceuticals or the street purchase of heroin".

Jane said the price increase would cost her more than \$120 a year and impact her ability to afford other health treatments like dental care.

"I've visited the doctors, I've got a script in preparation for the changes but I did not know there would be another cost associated with (treating) something I have no control over," Jane said.

"I can see it is highly likely (that people will self-medicate) and I can understand ... that people would turn to something like ice," she said.

"I think for people who are doing the right thing (the increase) is really unjustifiable and not fair."

Nurofen Plus is no longer available over the counter at chemists.

Jane said attempts to treat her crippling pain in other ways had been unsuccessful.

Ms Bennett, who supports the removal of codeine product from over-the-counter sale, said all states needed to commit to a national pain strategy to ensure Australians had other safe pain management treatments to turn to. She said codeine was not an effective pain reliever, but many Australians were not aware of, or able to access effective alternatives.

“We need a national pain strategy,” Ms Bennet said.

“We also need to make the community more aware of other pain treatment options and ensure other treatments (such as physiotherapy) are readily available and affordable”.

Days after over the counter codeine moved to prescription-only, the *Geelong Advertiser* observed supermarket shelves holding non-codeine pain relief products were nearly empty.

And in the weeks leading up to the change, Geelong residents stockpiled codeine products.

Federal Health Minister Greg Hunt said codeine changes will save lives.

“Each year, low dose codeine products are a factor in the death of more than 100 Australians,” Mr Hunt said.

“Research shows that around half a million Australians are misusing over-the-counter products containing codeine, with many people becoming dependent on it, contributing to serious health complications. Consumers will not be disadvantaged by this change.”