

# Codeine bans forcing painkiller addicts onto dark web, authorities say, as sufferers criticise changes

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AUTHORITIES fear people addicted to painkillers will resort to feeding their habit through the internet or by stealing from chemists, after medicines containing low-dose codeine were taken off the shelves at pharmacies across Australia last month.

The ban removed Panadeine, Panadeine Extra, Mersyndol, Nurofen Plus, Panafen Plus, Aspalgin, Codis and Dispirin Forte.

The *Leader* can reveal it has found websites illegally selling codeine into Australia, with no prescription required.

The website Legal Online Pharmacy is selling the drug, charging \$550 for 240 30mg pills.

Deakin University cyber security Professor Matt Warren said when restrictions were put on medicines they were likely to be in demand online and on the dark web.

“Illegal and prescription drugs are in high demand on the dark web and there are high risks involved because you don’t know the quality of the drug you’re purchasing,” Prof Warren said.

He said the dark web continued to be accessed by drug dealers and addicts.

“People with opioid addictions will go to all lengths to buy from these sites on the dark web because it’s becoming harder for authorities to track their footsteps,” he said.

Earlier this month, crooks wielding a sledgehammer and crowbar broke into the Lilydale Lakeside Pharmacy and stole 13 boxes of Prodeine Forte.

Yarra Ranges detective Senior Constable Mark Smithwick said the thieves prised open the pharmacy’s security gate with a crowbar and used a sledgehammer to break into the glass doors before raiding the shop.

The Pharmacy Guild of Australia Victorian branch president Anthony Tassone said there was always the risk of any substance that was subject to dependence or misuse to end up being obtained and distributed illegally.

An Australian Border Force spokesman, who refused to be named, said the organisation used data analysis technology and intelligence sharing to detect

prohibited items coming across the border, including those that may have been purchased over the dark net.

“People should not assume the dark net is invisible to authorities,” the spokesman said.

Legal Online Pharmacy did not respond to Leader’s request for comment.

### **More GP visits, longer waiting times: pain sufferers oppose changes**

PAIN sufferers say they are frustrated by long wait times at doctors and extra costs since codeine medications were taken off pharmacy shelves last month.

In an attempt to stop codeine addiction and substance abuse, medicines containing low-dose codeine were taken off shelves in February, forcing millions of pain sufferers to now visit a GP to obtain them.

Cassie Collins, of Mooroolbark, who suffers from chronic migraines and takes Mersyndol Forte, said the codeine bans were an inconvenience.

Chronic migraine sufferer Cassie Collins takes Mersyndol Forte, and says the codeine bans are an inconvenience.

“Now that codeine can no longer be sold over the counter it means more appointments with my GP at \$75 a visit with about a \$34 rebate,” Ms Collins said.

Leesa Williamson, of Frankston, said the new system had “failed her”.

“One packet of Mersyndol Nights can last me two months ... but these changes have added more waiting times to see a GP and more stress on Medicare as the service will now be in high demand,” Ms Williamson said.

The Pharmacy Guild of Australia Victorian branch president Anthony Tassone said the feedback from pharmacists was that consumers were in opposition to the new laws.

“Pharmacists are at the frontline and spending considerable time explaining these changes and hearing concerns from patients about potential additional out-of-pocket costs and wait times in having to see a doctor to obtain a prescription,” Mr Tassone said.

He said the guild and the Pharmaceutical Society of Australia developed a proposal which would allow low-dose codeine products to be available without a prescription in genuine cases of acute pain.

“The program was underpinned by a mandatory real time monitoring system called SafeScript ... and while receiving a good hearing from State and Federal governments across Australia, no state chose to take forward the guild’s proposal,” he said.

Mr Tassone said the new system would help doctors and pharmacists to monitor and make informed decisions about prescribing and supplying certain medicines that may pose risks of dependence and addiction.

Turning Point clinical director of drug and alcohol services Dr Matthew Frei says changes could lead to a surge in other addictions. Picture: Nicki Connolly  
Turning Point clinical director of drug and alcohol services Dr Matthew Frei said he feared the introduction of the SafeScript system and changes to over-the-counter could potentially lead to a surge in other addictions.

“These changes could lead to movements in heroin markets as it’s possible that people suffering from addiction could turn to this drug as it’s also used for pain relief,” Dr Frei said.

Painaustralia chief executive Carol Bennett said while over-the-counter codeine was mostly ineffective for chronic pain, better pain management options needed to be readily available.

“There needs to be better education in the community about pain management solutions and it’s important for people to visit their GP for a proper diagnosis before turning to codeine,” Ms Bennett said.