

Opinion: AMAQ calls for real-time monitoring for codeine prescriptions to tackle addiction

Richard Kidd, The Courier-Mail
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A FEW months ago President Donald Trump told a crisis meeting at the White House that the US's opioid drug epidemic was a "national emergency".

Unusually for President Trump, his comments did not attract controversy.

That's because fatal drug overdoses in the US hit 59,000 last year – a massive jump from the 1990s when the annual toll was under 10,000.

It is no longer heroin that is America's drug scourge, but powerful prescription opioid drugs such as oxycodone.

Australian politicians are not sounding the alarm on this issue as loudly as President Trump, although they certainly should be.

Our opioid problem is second only to that of the US and is rapidly growing.

Almost four Australians die from a drug overdose each day and most of these deaths are now linked to prescription drugs.

Australians are the second-highest users of morphine and codeine worldwide and around a third of all patients using opioids long-term for pain medication are now classified as addicts.

The facts are alarming and should concern us all.

The Australian Medical Association Queensland has already called for the State Government to introduce a real-time prescription monitoring service which will prevent patients from obtaining multiple prescriptions from multiple GPs – a practice known as "doctor-shopping".

The Therapeutic Goods Administration – our national, independent drugs regulator – has also ordered that codeine and codeine-based medicines must only be sold with a prescription from February 1.

This decision has been criticised by the Pharmacy Guild and some patients who regularly buy over-the-counter codeine products for pain relief.

To some it may seem a long draw to link drugs such as Panadeine and Codral to America's tsunami of opioid deaths – but it is not.

Codeine metabolises into morphine in the livers of patients. It is not a harmless drug. It is highly addictive and deadly in sufficient quantities.

Codeine poisoning was recorded as a factor in 1437 deaths in Australia between 2000 and 2013 and was the underlying cause of death in 113 cases.

Long-term use of codeine products containing paracetamol or ibuprofen can also result in liver damage, internal bleeding, kidney failure and even heart attacks.

Disturbingly, the incidence of codeine deaths is increasing, along with the number of Australians who are progressing to more powerful opioid painkilling drugs.

This is the stark background to the Therapeutic Goods Administration's decision.

Of course, most patients who buy codeine over-the-counter use the drug quite safely.

But all of the available evidence supports restricting the use of codeine – and Australia has actually been slower to act than most other developed countries, such as the US, Germany and Japan.

There are safer, non-addictive alternatives to codeine and anyone who relies on it for pain relief should see their GP to discuss their condition and medication needs.

This may be an inconvenience to some, but the alternative is to allow the codeine toll to grow and for codeine to remain as a gateway drug to even more dangerous painkillers.

The price of freely selling codeine to our community is too high to allow it to continue.

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