

Feature

The end of over-the-counter codeine in Australia

The dangers of addiction and overdose related to opioid-based medications are well documented and, in Australia, research shows products containing the painkiller codeine are related to about 100 deaths per year, in addition to the morbidity related to addiction and dependency on these drugs.

These issues have led to Australia's Therapeutic Goods Administration, the country's national drugs regulator, banning the sale of all over-the-counter (OTC) medications that contain codeine since Feb 1, 2018. Patients can now only obtain such products with a prescription. Products containing codeine derivatives, pholcodine, dextromethorphan, and dihydrocodeine have been unaffected by the ban.

Although there have been some inferences in the media that this is another example of Australia's so-called nanny state approach, there has been widespread support for the ban from health experts. "The Australian and New Zealand College of Anaesthetists (ANZCA) and other professional bodies are strongly supportive of the ban", explains Chris Hayes, dean of the faculty of pain medicine at ANZCA and based at John Hunter Hospital, Newcastle, NSW, Australia. "The Pharmacy Guild of Australia and Pharmaceutical Society of Australia were the only dissenting health professional voices."

"Prior to this ban, pharmacies had introduced a real-time monitoring system for OTC sales of codeine-containing products, which required a consumer to show some identification to check their recent codeine purchases", says Peter Carroll, professor and head of pharmacology, School of Medicine, University of Notre Dame, Sydney, and president of the NSW Branch of the Pharmaceutical Society of Australia, which was opposed to the ban. "This allowed pharmacists to identify those people who may have been misusing the products, and to offer them counselling and referral to a doctor or other health-care professional for further assessment and appropriate care. This monitoring system also showed that at least 98% of consumers were purchasing the products appropriately and safely to treat short-term, acute pain, such as toothache, period pain, and migraine. Now that OTC sales have stopped, this real-time monitoring system in pharmacies has been turned off."

Before the OTC codeine ban, research on opioid pack sales in Australia reported that 37% of sales were for OTC codeine, 29% were for prescription codeine, and 34% were for all other prescription opioids. "When one also considers codeine-related deaths, other adverse effects, and low efficacy, Australia can be said to have a major problem with codeine use", explains Hayes. "But, overall,

the transition to an OTC ban has progressed smoothly, and the majority of health professionals strongly support the change."

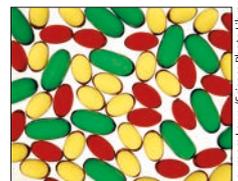
There had been anecdotal reports of panic buying of codeine-containing products, especially during January, 2018, as the ban approached. However, fears that there would be a flood of patients trying to obtain codeine-based medications through their general practitioners seem to so far be unfounded, according the Royal Australian College of General Practitioners. An additional emerging concern is that industry and pharmacies have used the ban as an excuse to substantially increase the cost for obtaining prescribed codeine products, leading to Federal Health Minister Greg Hunt referring the issue to the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission.

However, Hayes has heard of more patients in general practice requesting codeine prescriptions and says that this was inevitable. "The use of OTC codeine in these patients was previously unrecognised. It is likely that some of these patients will benefit from referral to pain or addiction medicine services", he says. "OTC paracetamol and/or non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs such as ibuprofen remain easily accessible medication alternatives." However, he acknowledges that multidisciplinary or interdisciplinary pain management resources are more difficult to access.

Regardless of support or opposition to the ban, most experts agree that Australia now needs to reinstate real-time monitoring of prescription codeine use across Australia, to prevent patients with dependency issues moving between practitioners to obtain codeine-based medications instead of considering alternatives or dealing with the causes of their chronic pain. There is also agreement that Australia must renew and revise its national strategy for pain, which has received inadequate funding and has left many Australians, particularly in rural areas, struggling to access dedicated pain services.

"In our pre-budget submission [for] 2018-19, we have requested that the Australian Federal Government makes provision for updating the National Pain Strategy", says Carol Bennett, chief executive of Pain Australia, Deakin, ACT, Australia—an advocacy organisation that aims to improve the lives of all Australians living with pain. "Other priorities include better information for consumers and expansion of online pain management education programmes; a strategy to reduce opioid use after surgery; a national approach to rehabilitation for injured workers; and improved pain management practices in aged care facilities."

Tony Kirby



For the **prebudget submission from Pain Australia** see <http://www.painaustralia.org.au/static/uploads/files/painaustralia-budget-submission-18-19-color-wfbralgwytgq.pdf>

For a **study on codeine deaths in Australia** see <https://www.mja.com.au/journal/2015/203/7/trends-and-characteristics-accidental-and-intentional-codeine-overdose-deaths>

For the **study on opioid pack sales in Australia** see <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/pds.3931/abstract>