PHARMACY PROFILE: Disposal of Unwanted Medicines

Families are often not aware of what to do with medicines when they are no longer required.

Key Messages

- Discuss with patients and families the importance of safe disposal of unwanted medications, including what to do with medicines when a patient dies.
- For patients receiving opioid analgesics, discussions around safe disposal are especially important, to minimise risk of abuse/misuse/accidental exposure.
- Assist patients and their families with accessing and disposing of sharps containers.

In addition to other discussions with patients undergoing palliative care and their families, it is important to provide patients and families information regarding the safe disposal of unwanted medications. This may include situations where therapy is changed or after a patient dies. The hoarding of old and unwanted medicines can lead to medicines becoming toxic, being abused or misused, or causing harm to children if left lying around.

Families and patients need to understand that the only safe disposal method for medications which are unwanted or expired is to return them to a retail pharmacy or hospital pharmacy department. The Australian Government funds the National Return Unwanted Medicines (RUM) Project, which facilitates the collection and disposal of expired, unwanted or unused medicines from the community. The RUM project uses the national community pharmacy network to collect unwanted medicines, which are then disposed of through high temperature incineration. This means of disposal reduces the risk of accidental use of medicines and prevents environmental damage from unsafe disposal, such as flushing medicines down the toilet, tipping them down the sink or putting them out with the garbage. There is no cost of this service for consumers. Returned medicines are not recycled.

For patients using injectable medicines, discussions about appropriate disposal of sharps are needed. Local councils can provide information about where to dispose of sharps containers in the individual council areas. Some councils also provide sharp containers to patients, at cost price. Diabetes Australia and some pharmacies sell sharps containers. Full sharps containers should not be put out in the general waste bins. It is important to discuss a plan of disposal of sharps containers as part of the medication management plan if injectable preparations are being used.

Special considerations for patients receiving opioid analgesics in the outpatient setting

Disposal of unwanted or expired opioid analgesics needs particular caution, due to the potential for abuse/misuse and significant risks associated with accidental exposure.
Patches

The contents of used opioid patches (such as fentanyl or buprenorphine) may be retrieved and potentially abused. In addition, deaths have occurred in children accidentally exposed to the patches. For example, with fentanyl patches, 30–50% of the original amount remains in the patch after three days of use, so it still provides considerable risk of misuse/abuse/accidental exposure. Patients and families should be instructed to fold patches so the adhesive side of patches adheres to itself, then wrap such that the patches are concealed and dispose of carefully (out of reach of children).

Tablets

In an attempt to reduce the risk of misuse and abuse of opioid medication, the pharmaceutical industry has indicated its preparedness to consider tamper resistant technology. One such example is the reformulated version of OxyContin® tablets. These tablets now have a matrix formulation with a hydrogelling property, such that particles or whole tablets become gel like when in contact with water. This formulation is intended to be crush deterrent and to decrease the rapid release of oxycodone upon accidental or intentional misuse.

Disposal systems

Purpose-manufactured controlled drug disposal kits have also been developed and may be in use in some pharmacies. These suspend the opioid in a gel, thereby making the product harder to retrieve. Some kits now come complete with a chemical neutralising agent to denature the medications, also reducing risk of divergence.

Discuss with patients and their families the need to return unwanted opioid medications to a local pharmacy or hospital pharmacy department as soon as possible for appropriate and safe disposal.

This update is intended to provide practical up to date information relating to medicines management in the setting of palliative care and is based on critical review of available evidence. Individual patient circumstances must be considered when applying this information.

Useful resources

- Contact your local pharmacist or hospital drug information service.
- National Prescriber Service Website - ‘NPS Medicinewise’ is an excellent resource for consumers and health professionals.

Authors: Deb Rowett and Jody Rothmore, Drug and Therapeutics Information Service, Repatriation General Hospital, South Australia