Public Health Association of Australia:

Policy-at-a-glance – Pharmaceutical Drug Misuse Policy

**Key message:** PHAA will

1. Support strategies focused primarily on preventing or delaying the onset of drug misuse, and minimising harm associated with misuse.
2. Advocate this policy to the Ministerial Council on Drug Strategy (MCDS), all levels of government and other relevant interested parties.
3. Seek to assist in the development of the National Pharmaceutical Drug Misuse Framework.

**Summary:** PHAA believes that policy and programs should be designed and implemented to: raise awareness, restrict supply, improve monitoring, reduce demand, and reduce harm. This policy seeks to outline a series of principles and tangible actions designed to achieve these goals.

**Audience:** Australian, State and Territory Governments, policy makers and program managers.

**Responsibility:** PHAA’s Health Promotion Special Interest Group (SIG)

**Date policy adopted:** October 2017

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Pharmaceutical Drug Misuse Policy

The Public Health Association of Australia notes that:

1. Pharmaceutical drug misuse refers to any use of pharmaceutical drugs that is inconsistent with the intended use or directions, which includes overuse, intentional misuse and diversion to unintended users.¹

2. Pharmaceutical drug misuse is common in Australia, which shows an increasing trend and is accompanied by an escalating number of adverse outcomes.²
   - The 2016 National Drug Strategy Household Survey found that 4.8% of Australians aged 14 or older had misused a pharmaceutical in the previous 12 months, which was a significant rise from 4.2% in 2010 and is the highest proportion reported since 2001.³
   - In 2016, the pharmaceuticals most likely to have been used in the previous 12 months were pain-killers/pain-relievers and opioids, and, of those who had recently used pain-killers/pain-relievers and opioids, the majority used over-the-counter (75%) drugs as their main type rather than prescription analgesics (40%).³

3. The risks associated with the use and misuse of pharmaceutical drugs is poorly recognised within the community. Many people perceive opioid analgesics and benzodiazepines to be “low risk” because they are therapeutically indicated by a health professional, “safer” than illicit drugs, and do not recognise them as drugs for potential misuse.⁴

4. Pharmaceutical drug misuse can lead to dependence, poisoning, serious morbidity and deaths. Pharmaceutical drug misusers may also experience difficulties with their relationships, poor outcomes in education or employment, and legal problems. Harms associated with pharmaceutical misuse reach beyond the individual to impact on family, workplaces and the community. Pharmaceutical misuse places a burden on the health system and is associated with both crime to obtain and divert, and crime under the influence of drugs.⁵

The Public Health Association of Australia affirms the following principles:

5. Pharmaceutical drugs, when used as intended as part of quality medical care, make a positive contribution to the health and wellbeing of many members of the community.⁴ Strategies to reduce pharmaceutical misuse must balance the need to preserve the community benefits of these drugs against the requirement to protect the community from harm associated with misuse.

6. A public health approach to reduce pharmaceutical misuse and associated harms must be comprehensive and focus primarily on preventing or delaying the onset of drug misuse, and minimise harm associated with misuse. A combination of prevention strategies addressing the broader community, plus targeting at-risk groups and existing users is required. Policy responses to
pharmaceutical misuse should ensure that pharmaceutical medications with dependence liability are only prescribed where there is evidence that they are the most effective treatment, and where safeguards such as ongoing monitoring of effectiveness and for evidence of adverse effects are in place to minimise harms.\(^6\)

The Public Health Association of Australia believes that the following steps should be undertaken:

7. Raise awareness:
   - Raise awareness of the community and health professionals to the risk of dependence, other harms and potential for misuse of pharmaceutical drugs.
   - Patients need to be aware of possible fatal complications of mixing opioids, benzodiazepines and/or alcohol.\(^7\)

8. Restrict supply:
   - Limit prescription duration and over-the-counter (OTC) packaging size for pharmaceuticals prone to misuse to short term use only, requiring patients and consumers to engage with a health professional to determine appropriateness of prolonged use.
   - In a general practice setting, the use of evidence-based guidelines can help with managing inappropriate requests for drugs of dependence.\(^7\)

9. Improve monitoring:
   - Implement with regular monitoring of real-time electronic coordinated medication management systems to limit drug-seeking and enable prescribers, dispensers and regulators to make informed and timely decisions about safe supply of schedule 8, prescription opioids, over the counter codeine analgesics and any other pharmaceutical drugs prone to misuse at the time of prescribing or dispensing.

10. Reduce demand:
    - Increase health professional and consumer awareness and use of non-drug management options for conditions such as anxiety, insomnia and chronic pain.

11. Reduce harm:
    - At prescribing and dispensing occasions of pharmaceutical drugs prone to misuse, inform consumers of the risks associated with use, non-medical use, and provide information on ways to prevent harm and access support and treatment.
    - Ensure people who use and misuse pharmaceutical drugs can receive treatment and care that is appropriate, accessible, affordable and informed by evidence.
The Public Health Association of Australia resolves to undertake the following actions:

12. The Board, Special Interest Groups and State and Territory Branches will advocate this policy to the Ministerial Council on Drug Strategy (MCDS), all levels of government and other relevant interested parties.

13. PHAA will seek to assist in the development of the National Pharmaceutical Drug Misuse Framework.

ADOPTED 2013, REVISED AND RE-ENDORSED IN 2017

First adopted at the 2013 Annual General Meeting of the Public Health Association of Australia. The latest revision has been undertaken as part of the 2017 policy review process.
PHAA Policy Statement on: Pharmaceutical Drug Misuse Policy

References