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LETTERS

CODEINE DEPENDENCE

Time to review the provision of addiction treatment for codeine dependence

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The anaesthetist jailed in the UK for stealing over 2500 codeine tablets from a hospital shows not only the vulnerability of the healthcare system to diversion of drugs but also the need for addiction treatment for those suffering from codeine dependence.¹ Codeine dependence is a serious problem that can cause physiological and psychological harm.^{2,3}

Deaths involving codeine or codeine/paracetamol in England and Wales have almost doubled in the past two decades.⁴ Although the number of people in treatment for codeine addiction has risen in the past 5 years,⁵ many depend on alternative support, such as from the internet, to manage codeine misuse.³

A recent online survey conducted in the UK and Ireland showed the ease with which codeine can be obtained. It found that 30% of those dependent on codeine faked symptoms to get a codeine prescription, 61% bought codeine from three or more pharmacies in a six month period, and 24% of those who were refused over-the-counter codeine went on to purchase it from another pharmacy.³

People who take codeine for valid reasons may require higher doses over time, and this can develop into dependence. Once dependent, people are likely to start doctor and pharmacy “shopping” or stealing to consume high doses and avoid

withdrawal. Tighter regulation and closer monitoring of over-the-counter sales may be part of the solution, but we also need to examine the service provision for patients with codeine dependence, as current treatment services may not be adequate or appropriate. Timely access to addiction treatment is necessary to tackle the consequences of codeine dependence.

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Full response at: <http://www.bmj.com/content/359/bmj.j4841/rr>.

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- 2 Cooper RJ. Over-the-counter medicine abuse—a review of the literature. *J Subst Use* 2013;359:82-107. doi:10.3109/14659891.2011.615002 pmid:23525509.
- 3 Kimergård A, Foley M, Davey Z, Dunne J, Drummond C, Deluca P. Codeine use, dependence and help-seeking behaviour in the UK and Ireland: an online cross-sectional survey. *QJM* 2017;359:559-64. doi:10.1093/qjmed/hcx076 pmid:28379496.
- 4 Office for National Statistics. *Deaths related to drug poisoning in England and Wales: 2016 registrations*. Office for National Statistics, 2017.
- 5 Parry CDH, Deluca P, Cooper R, Van Hout MC. Do we have sufficient information to optimally inform regulatory or other policy decisions about medications containing codeine? *Addiction* 2015;359:1690-1. doi:10.1111/add.13047 pmid:26250941.

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