Disposal of Transdermal Opioid Patches

The availability of opioid transdermal delivery systems (‘opioid patches’) provides a useful treatment option for chronic pain patients. In particular, those suffering absorption and side effect complications with oral preparations may find that opioid patches provide an effective source of pain relief.

Current opioid patches retain significant amounts of active drug after the duration of their use. There is a risk that opioid patches may be abused by others after their removal from the patient. Reports exist across Australia of accidental overdose and deaths of children who have accessed opioid patches. Thus it is important to have appropriate disposal mechanisms in place to reduce these risks of harm.

Pharmacies and Health Service Facilities

Used patches:

Although recording the destruction of used opioid is not considered a legal requirement of Regulation 45, the Drugs of Dependence Unit recommends the following practices when disposing used opioid patches.

1. The disposal process – including the removal of the opioid patch from the patient’s person if in a health service facility– is witnessed.
2. Opioid patches are folded onto themselves (adhesive sides facing each other)
3. Opioid patches are placed in a sharps medical-waste disposal container.
4. The disposal process is recorded in the drug of dependence register, and countersigned by a witness.

Unused patches:

Regulation 45 of the Controlled Substances (Poisons) Regulations 2011 (SA) specifies that unused drugs of dependence, including opioid patches such as Durogesic® (fentanyl) and Norspan® (buprenorphine), may be destroyed only in certain circumstances;

1. The destruction is witnessed by another person, being an authorised officer, police officer, medical practitioner, dentist, veterinary surgeon, pharmacist or nurse; and
2. The person destroying the opioid patch ensures that the following information is recorded in respect of the drug immediately after its destruction:

   (i) the full names and signatures of the person and the witness to the destruction; and
   (ii) the trade name or approved name of the drug or, if it did not have either a trade name or approved name, its ingredients; and
   (iii) the amount and, where applicable, the strength of the drug; and
   (iv) the date and time of destruction; and
   (v) the amount of the drug (if any) now remaining in stock on the premises at which the destroyed drug was stored.
Poisons must not be disposed in any place or manner representing a risk to public health or safety. As such, sharps medical-waste disposal containers that are ultimately incinerated are considered the most convenient and appropriate receptacles for disposing opioid patches.

Staff should contact their preferred waste-disposal operator to have sharps medical-waste disposal containers collected for incineration.

The Pharmacy Guild of Australia (SA Branch) currently provides sharps medical-waste disposal containers for South Australian pharmacies. While the containers are subsidised by Drug and Alcohol South Australia’s Clean Needle Program, and are thus intended to be repositories for injecting equipment, the containers may also be used for disposal of opioid patches. Pharmacies may arrange for the provision, emptying, and disposal of sharps medical-waste disposal containers directly through Ms Hannah Ade at the Guild on (08) 8304 8300 or via email hannah.ade@sa.guild.org.au.

In the Home

Patients prescribed or supplied opioid patches are encouraged to familiarise themselves with the corresponding Consumer Medicine Information; Durogesic® (fentanyl) and Norspan® (buprenorphine). These documents contain instructions about replacing and disposing used opioid patches.

When counselling, Pharmacists should instruct patients on the need to dispose of used patches carefully to reduce the risk of harms.

Patients should be encouraged to ensure used opioid patches are folded onto themselves (adhesive sides facing each other), then wrapped in newspaper, or similar, and discarded in general household refuse. Alternatively, folded patches may be returned to the pharmacy for disposal.

Unused opioid patches should be returned to the pharmacy for disposal.

The above measures will help to prevent subsequent misuse of used opioid patches, but will also make them less accessible to other adults, children, and animals.