

From Kathryn Turner, Head of Pharmacy & Medicines Management (Interim)



By email

To Community Pharmacies in
Newtownabbey, Greenisland,
Carrickfergus, Whitehead and Larne

Strategic Planning and Performance Group

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Dear Colleague

COMMUNITY PHARMACY OVER-THE-COUNTER CODEINE BRIEF INTERVENTION & REFERRAL PILOT SERVICE

The availability of over-the-counter (OTC) medicines from community pharmacies as a treatment option is welcomed both by patients and by healthcare providers beyond pharmacy. However, it is well-recognised that some OTC medicines have potential for misuse, abuse and harm.

Medicines associated with this potential include compound analgesics containing codeine or dihydrocodeine. Compound codeine analgesic preparations are a cause for particular concern, with a rising number of individuals presenting to both acute hospitals and addiction services with serious health problems as a result of the excessive paracetamol and ibuprofen intake associated with abuse of such formulations.

Through your role within community pharmacy, you will be aware that the potential risks of inappropriate use of OTC codeine products have recently been highlighted to the public through the recent Department of Health (DoH) public campaign via social media messaging and signposting to [resources](#) that have been distributed to all community pharmacies across Northern Ireland¹.

To further support people with problematic use of OTC codeine products, the DoH Controlled Drug Accountable Officer² (CDAO) for primary care, the DoH Strategic Planning and Performance Group, Public Health Agency (PHA), Northern Health and Social Care Trust (NHSCT) and Community Pharmacy NI (CPNI) have been working together to develop a pilot community pharmacy brief intervention service. The pilot will take place in the East Antrim area and will provide an opportunity to complete a brief intervention and where appropriate, provide a direct referral pathway for individuals to the Northern Trust Community Addiction Service (CAS) to assess for treatment and support. The CAS can also provide advice to Community Pharmacy as part of the service.

² [Controlled Drugs Accountable Officer | Department of Health](#). Legislation: [The Controlled Drugs \(Supervision of Management and Use\) Regulations \(Northern Ireland\) 2009 \(legislation.gov.uk\)](#)

Indicators of problematic use include:³

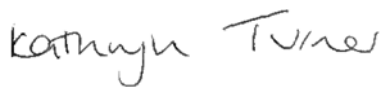
- Requesting specific named products for example, Nurofen Plus and equivalent brands, Co-codamol and Solpadeine, on a regular basis
- Requesting larger pack sizes or more frequent purchases
- Becoming defensive when questioned or providing inconsistent responses on the requirement and indication for the requested medication
- Presenting at the same times of day/busier times of day when it is less likely to be questioned
- Sedated or agitated presentation
- Evidence of “Pharmacy hopping” - Individuals may be using more than one pharmacy to purchase OTC codeine products and/or concerns may have been raised from other local Community Pharmacies.

It is anticipated that the service will start in February 2026 and in advance of this date, mandatory online training will take place for community pharmacies delivering the pilot service on 15th January 2026 at 7:30pm; this session will be led by the PHA funded workforce development programme delivered by ASCERT. Training will also be recorded for those who cannot attend. It will cover background information on codeine misuse as well as practical advice on:

- How to start a conversation about the topic
- Carrying out a risk assessment
- Brief intervention: advice/support, resources, signposting, +/- referral etc
- NHSCT CAS support available for patients
- How to make a referral and allay concerns about referral

This letter is intended to provide advance notice about the pilot service and further information including the service specification and contract will be shared in due course. All pharmacies are strongly encouraged to participate in this opportunity.

Yours sincerely



Kathryn Turner
Head of Pharmacy and Medicines Management (Interim)



Stephanie Hanlon,
Joint Substance Use Lead, PHA



Dr Lisa Byers, PHD, IP, MPSNI
Controlled Drugs Accountable Officer

³ Adapted from (Foley et al. 2015, Van Hout et al. 2017, Independent Expert Working Group [IEWG] 2017)