



Managing drug seeking behaviour in the general practice setting

There is strong evidence in Australia of increasing harm from prescription drugs of dependence, including deaths from overdose. Dependency on prescription drugs can occur at any age, within any cultural group and across any educational class. Patients with dependencies may not necessarily display obvious drug-seeking behaviours.

People who misuse prescription drugs most commonly seek prescriptions for opioids and benzodiazepines. Other prescription drugs that are misused include the newer antipsychotics such as quetiapine and olanzapine, and stimulants such as dexamphetamine and methylphenidate (James, 2016).

Behaviours exhibited by 'prescription shopping' patients

Practices should be aware of the following behaviour, which patients may exhibit if intending to seek drugs of addiction:

- Arriving after regular hours or requests an appointment toward the end of office hours.
- Stating that he/she is travelling through the area or visiting friends or relatives.
- Providing an old clinical report and/or X-ray (often from interstate) in support of their request.
- Declining permission to obtain past records, undergo a physical examination or diagnostic tests.
- Showing an unusual knowledge about opioid or benzodiazepine medications.
- Claiming to have lost a prescription, or has forgotten to pack their medication, or saying their medication was stolen or damaged.
- Refusing all other therapeutic options.

When drug seeking is suspected

General practices have a responsibility to work collaboratively with health practitioners in order to continuously improve care for patients and to improve the quality and safety of prescription drug use.

General practices should:

- Develop a policy for your clinic on requests from new patients for drugs of dependence. Ensure that all staff know this policy and agree to implement it.
- Impose conditions for general practice registrars prescribing drugs of dependence, such as seeking the input of their supervisor.
- Have the WA Department of Health Prescription Shopping Information Service telephone number available – **1800 631 181**.
- Have the WA Department of Health Medicines and Poisons branch telephone number readily available – **08 9388 6883**.
- Promote multidisciplinary care for patients who use drugs of dependence.
- Promote alcohol and other drug services such as the free and confidential 24/7 Alcohol and Drug Support Line 9442 5000 or 1800 198 024 (country).
- Ensure the 'universal precaution' approach for all patients with chronic pain. This includes taking a brief drug and alcohol history, monitoring for aberrant drug behaviour and recognising that pain and addictive diseases exist as a continuum rather than as two distinct patient groups (Monheit, 2010).
- Implement strategies to ensure the occupational health and safety of general practitioners and other members of the practice team.

Whilst all care has been taken in preparing this document, this information is a guide only and subject to change without notice.

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Staff education and competency

To reduce the incidence of inappropriate medication requests:

- Include signs in the waiting room stating your practice has a policy of not prescribing drugs of dependence to new patients.
- Provide training for staff members regarding identification of a high-risk situation – for example, reception staff who are able to identify potential drug-seeking behaviours can ensure those patients are scheduled to see doctors experienced with this level of risk.
- When new patients make an appointment, receptionists should mention that doctors will do a detailed assessment and may need additional information from patients' previous doctors prior to making any treatment decisions, including prescribing medicines.
- Ensure staff safety by adopting a zero tolerance to violence towards staff – Posters are available from the Royal Australian College of General Practitioners (RACGP) – see Resources for links.
- The clinical governance team of the practice may set ceiling limits for drugs of dependence prescribing in the practice – include this in the policies and procedures.
- Develop clear plans for all staff on how to respond to requests for drugs of dependence using a scripted response

General practice accreditation

Practices should undergo and maintain accreditation according to the RACGP Standards for general practices (now in the 5th edition). Accreditation is a basic risk management strategy and will ensure that the practice is 'fit for purpose' in delivering high quality, safe primary care services.

The Standards recommend that practices:

- Develop and implement practice policies or protocols in areas such as drugs of dependence. This will help meet Indicator Q12.2C – Our clinical team accesses current information on medicines, and reviews our prescribing patterns, in accordance with best available evidence
- Maintain a Schedule 8 medicines register to meet Indicator Q12.2E – Our clinical team ensures that medicines, samples, and medical consumables are acquired, stored, administered, supplied and disposed of in accordance with manufacturers' directions and relevant laws
- Assign clinical leaders who have designated areas of responsibilities regarding safety and quality improvement systems

- Appoint a drugs of dependence coordinator, who is responsible for developing strategies to prevent harm, manage harm when it occurs, and provide a safe, supportive workplace and culture.
- Undertake extra general practitioner training on how to manage and treat drug and alcohol issues in primary care.

More information

Australian Medical Association

<https://ama.com.au/article/prescribing-drugs-addiction-members-support-page>

Government of Western Australia – Mental Health Commission. Community Alcohol and Drug Services (CADS).

<https://www.mhc.wa.gov.au/getting-help/community-alcohol-and-drug-services/>

Government of Western Australia Department of Health – Medicines and Poisons Regulation Branch http://ww2.health.wa.gov.au/Articles/N_R/Pharmaceutical-Services-Branch

NPS website – Facts and legal responsibilities around appropriate prescribing of opioids

<https://www.nps.org.au/australian-prescriber/articles/opioid-prescribing-pitfalls-medicolegal-and-regulatory-issues>

RACGP Clinical Guidelines

<https://www.racgp.org.au/your-practice/guidelines/drugs-of-dependence/>

RACGP Standards for general practices 5th edition

<https://www.racgp.org.au/download/Documents/Standards/5th%20Edition/racgp-standards-for-general-practices-5th-edition.pdf>

Relevant HealthPathways WA

Visit HealthPathways WA for more information <https://wa.healthpathways.org.au/index.htm>

- **Drugs of abuse screening -** <https://wa.healthpathways.org.au/178482.htm>
- **Fraudulent Access to Medicine -** <https://wa.healthpathways.org.au/35451.htm>

References

James, J. (2016). Dealing with drug-seeking behaviour. *Australian Prescriber*, 39(3), 96–100. <http://doi.org/10.18773/austprescr.2016.022>

Monheit, B. (2010). Prescription drug misuse. *Australian Family Physician Vol. 39*, No. 8, August 2010. Retrieved from <https://www.racgp.org.au/download/documents/AFP/2010/August/201008monheit.pdf>