Media Release

COUNTING THE COST OF OVER-THE-COUNTER DRUG MISUSE
New study shows high cost of overdose hospitalisations
Australasian Professional Society on Alcohol and other Drugs (APSAD) Conference

(Sydney, Wednesday 2 November 2016:) Misuse of over-the-counter (OTC) drugs containing codeine can be life-threatening and expensive to the Australian healthcare system, costing on average over $10,000 per hospital admission. However, awareness of overdosing risks, and suitable programs for those addicted to pain medications is limited, new research presented at the APSAD Scientific Alcohol and Drugs Conference shows.

THE COST OF HOSPITAL ADMISSIONS
An investigation into the numerous recent case reports of life-threatening hospitalisations associated with misuse of OTC combination analgesics containing codeine found:

- Most admissions related to gastrointestinal morbidities secondary to ibuprofen/codeine misuse;
- The mean length of stay per admission was 5.9 days, with 10.1% of admissions requiring intensive care unit stays;
- Patients consumed a mean of 28 OTC tablets per day, and were using codeine for a mean duration of 606 days prior to admission;
- Some patients reported using up to 90 tablets per day;
- The 99 admissions in the study were estimated to cost the health care system $1,008,082 with a mean cost of $10,183 per admission.

“Greater caution needs to be exercised with these drugs. These research findings can add to current deliberations on rescheduling OTC drugs containing codeine to prescription only,” said Dr Jacinta Johnson, Lecturer in Pharmacy, University of South Australia and Clinical Pharmacist, Flinders Medical Centre.

Abstract: Read ‘Counting the cost of OTC drug misuse’:

OVERDOSE KNOWLEDGE AND TREATMENT
1 in 10 people with Chronic Non-Cancer Pain report experiencing opioid overdose symptoms from their pain medications, yet most people surveyed had poor knowledge about overdosing. Having naloxone - a treatment for opioid overdoses - in the home medicine cupboard literally be a lifesaver for pain patients, and after receiving information about it, most participants in the study (60%), thought it was a ‘good’ or ‘very good’ idea.

“We need to strike the right balance between educating patients about how to reduce risks associated with taking opioid medications without creating fear.

In addition, health professionals should not assume patients with Chronic Non-Cancer Pain understand the signs of opioid toxicity. Many pharmaceutical overdose deaths occur in the presence of others. Patients with CNCP are open to discussing naloxone, and this support its greater use in
high risk patients,” said Dr Suzanne Nielsen, Senior Research Fellow, National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre, UNSW.

Abstract: Pain medication and opioid overdose remedy

“I’M NOT A JUNKIE”

People abusing OTC codeine analgesics are more likely to have a medical condition associated with their misuse, and the combination of addiction, pain and mental health can make treatment more complex. In a study comparing people in treatment for OTC codeine drug misuse with those receiving treatment for using other strong opioids, many OTC drug users reported discomfort attending services for people with other opioid addictions, saying they felt different. As a result, they were reluctant to engage. This group were also more likely to be female and were less likely to be unemployed.

“OTC codeine’s ready availability with minimal monitoring has the potential to put patients at risk of development of dependence. In addition, novel approaches and treatment pathways may need to be considered for people with addiction to OTC drugs containing codeine,” said researcher Kathryn Law from the Alcohol and Drug Service, Hobart, Australia.

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About
The APSAD Scientific Alcohol and Drugs Conference is the southern hemisphere’s largest summit on alcohol and other drugs attracting leading researchers, clinicians, policy makers and community representatives from across the region. The Conference is run by the Australasian Professional Society on Alcohol and other Drugs (APSAD), Asia Pacific’s leading multidisciplinary organisation for professionals involved in the alcohol and other drugs field.

- View the APSAD Sydney 2016 Conference Program
- Read more about the Australasian Professional Society on Alcohol and other Drugs (APSAD)
- Contact Petrana Lorenz to arrange an interview or find out about other key topics.

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