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## THE DANGERS OF PRESCRIPTION MEDICINE ABUSE – DRUG AWARENESS WEEK 2014

*25 June 2014:* According to statistics from the World Health Organisation, 50% of all patients around the world fail to take their medicine correctly. As part of this year's Drug Awareness Week (24 -28 June 2014), a greater focus will be placed on the growing need for consumer education around the dangers and risks associated with prescription and over-the-counter (OTC) medication abuse.

Dr Dominique Stott, Executive: Medical Standards and Services at PPS, says that it is incredibly important for consumers to educate themselves on the signs, symptoms and consequences of any misuse or addiction to prescription and OTC medication.

She says that medicine abuse is often higher with OTC medication, which can be purchased from select supermarkets and pharmacies without a prescription from a doctor. "Unfortunately, doctors and pharmacists have no control over how consumers use sometimes potentially dangerous medication."

The most common OTC medicines that are abused are cough syrups, medication to treat cold and flu symptoms and painkillers.

"Consumers often do not realise that they are abusing their OTC medicine. This usually happens as a result of the sense of relief or euphoria that the medication may provide the consumer," she adds.

She says that in some cases users may want to maintain the euphoric feeling that is created by the medication well after the symptoms (such as pain, coughing or flu-like symptoms) stop, even if the medicine is no longer needed. "Addiction usually sets in when consumers need increasing amounts of the medication to maintain the same levels of euphoria. This is when it can become dangerous."

Dr Stott points out that exceeding the intake and consumption of OTC medicine for euphoric reasons can have severe consequences. "Short term effects of this type of drug/medicine abuse include; drowsiness, vision impairment, loss of coordination, vomiting and hallucinations. Long term effects include; kidney and liver failure, neurological problems and psychiatric problems and can even lead to death."

As an example of this type of abuse, medication overuse headaches are a significant problem in chronic headache sufferers. Due to the chronic headaches, medication is taken more regularly than it should be. If the medication is stopped there is a rebound headache for which a patient will then take even more tablets, leading to an on-going need to take tablets which just increases with time.

“This is usually the case with headache tablets containing codeine; however, other headache tablet combinations may also cause the same problem. The only way to stop the headaches is to stop the tablets,” explains Dr Stott.

Ivan Kotzé, Executive Director of the Pharmaceutical Society of South Africa, agrees that it is vitally important to discuss the use of codeine containing medicines, such as painkillers and cough mixtures, with your pharmacist. Community pharmacists have launched the Codeine Care initiative, which encourages pharmacists to monitor the monthly codeine use of individual consumers. “In this way,” says Kotzé, “pharmacists will be able to identify overuse of codeine containing medicines and will be able to advise patients on how to limit their use before it becomes an addiction crisis. They are also able to refer people who are already addicted to codeine to facilities that can help them to overcome the problem.”

Dr Stott goes on to say that pharmacists also play a vital role in educating consumers about dosage and the side-effects of any medication usage. “The pharmacist will give the consumer proper advice, warnings and information on consumption of all medication that is purchased. As part of their role, pharmacists are also able to implement monitoring processes and programmes to evaluate consumers’ behaviour around frequent purchasing of medicine.”

“All medication, whether prescription or not, have side effects and it is important that consumers are aware of these risks in order to prevent any health complications or addictions,” concludes Stott.