

MEDIA RELEASE

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Combined use of opioids and benzodiazepines can be fatal, Faculty of Pain Medicine (ANZCA) and ScriptWise warn

Hundreds of Australians are dying from accidental drug overdoses each year by combining opioid medications such as codeine and oxycodone with sleeping pills, the Faculty of Pain Medicine of the Australian and New Zealand College of Anaesthetists (ANZCA) and ScriptWise have warned.

The potential risks of using and prescribing opioid and benzodiazepine medications are detailed in a joint statement released in the lead-up to international Overdose Awareness Day on August 31.

The statement encourages both the medical community and the general public to take action to reduce the number of fatal overdoses involving these medications.

Benzodiazepines (often referred to as sleeping pills or 'benzos') have been the [single most identified substance](#) in drug-induced deaths since 1999 in Australia.

According to a new report from the Penington Institute released today the number of deaths involving sleeping tablets has [doubled in just a decade](#).

And recently released statistics from the National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre show that in 2016 benzodiazepine medications contributed to [nearly half \(45%\) of all opioid overdoses](#).

Dr Meredith Craigie, Dean of the Faculty of Pain Medicine (ANZCA), says the joint FPM and ScriptWise statement seeks to encourage the medical community to adhere to best practice when prescribing. The current development of a National Pain Action Plan, supported by the Federal Government, will also help to improve access to best practice pain management strategies that do not rely solely on medications.

"Australian and international guidelines have recommended clinicians avoid prescribing opioids alongside benzodiazepines but unfortunately, we see this happening too frequently," says Dr Craigie.

"When central nervous system depressants such as opioids, benzodiazepines and alcohol are used together, it increases the risks of sedation, slowed breathing, coma and death."

"As clinicians, we have a responsibility to ensure not only that our patients understand these risks but also to provide alternative treatments and support to reduce their use of these medications long-term."

ScriptWise CEO Bee Mohamed has welcomed the Faculty's leadership within the medical community, emphasising that pain specialists, and multi-disciplinary pain management, have an increasingly important role in reducing harm.

"It's alarming that although more people are aware of the harms due to long-term prescription opioid use, most people still don't know anything about the risks associated with benzodiazepines," she said.

“We speak to far too many people who have been prescribed these medications but were never told about the risks of combining them, particularly with a glass of alcohol before bed.”

“Patients need to feel empowered to talk with their health professionals about safer and more effective ways to manage long-term health conditions such as anxiety or chronic pain.”

“A national real-time prescription monitoring system would give health professionals the opportunity to identify dangerous combinations of medications and provide their patients with more appropriate treatment.”

As part of the awareness campaign, ScriptWise has also launched new online resources, including videos with lead academics, to encourage Australians to understand the risks and seek help if needed. www.scriptwise.org.au

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Spokespeople available for interview:

- Dr Meredith Craigie – Dean of the Faculty of Pain Medicine (ANZCA)
- Bee Mohamed – CEO ScriptWise
- Sally – mother who lost her son to prescription opioids and benzodiazepines