

Chemists accused of putting profits ahead of patient safety in codeine prescription row

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EXCLUSIVE: Chemists are putting profits ahead of patient safety as they try to fight new rules that will make Panadeine and Nurofen Plus prescription only, doctors claim.

The powerful Pharmacy Guild of Australia has rejected claims by the nation's peak GP group that it is trying to buy a change in the policy through \$340,000 in donations to political parties.

And five expert health groups have written to state health ministers pleading with them to reject the Guild's bid to change the policy.

From February next year, over-the-counter products containing codeine including cold and flu capsules, Panadeine and Nurofen Plus will be made prescription only because of evidence they are addictive and kill 100 people a year.

There are over 6 million over-the-counter codeine-containing products sold each year and addiction rates have tripled.

The nation's medicines watchdog, the Therapeutic Goods Administration TGA, has the support of patient groups, the Australian Medical Association the Royal Australian College of GPs, the Royal Australasian College of Physicians and pain experts to make the medicine prescription only.

These five groups have this week written to state health ministers pleading with them to reject the Guild's bid to change the policy.

And the Pharmacy Guild of Australia has accepted \$200,000 of taxpayers' money to develop a consumer education program to manage the change.

Despite this, pharmacists who stand to lose up to \$120 million in medicine sales have now written to all state governments asking them to make an exception to the prescription rule.

And the Pharmacy Guild has won the support of NSW National Party leader and Deputy Premier John Barilaro who is calling for a rethink.

It has employed former Coalition Senator Santo Santoro to lobby state governments.

Mr Santoro he resigned from the Howard Government ministry in 2007 in the wake of a number of breaches of the Ministerial Code of Conduct and of the Register of Senators' Interests.

The Guild wants chemists to be able to continue supply the codeine medicines without a script for the temporary treatment of acute (not chronic) pain under a strict protocol.

The National President of the Pharmacy Guild, George Tambassis says doctors' practices and emergency departments will be clogged with people seeking help for headache, toothache and menstrual pain otherwise.

The Pharmacy Guild says far from being motivated by commercial interests it has paid for a real time recording platform to track over the counter codeine sales.

"The Guild provides bi-partisan support to the major political parties by attending and sponsoring events and functions. These are fully reported, recorded and published by the AEC. We reject the slur that this is 'buying political influence,'" a spokesman for the Guild said.

RACGP president Dr Bastian Seidel says codeine should not be used for tension headache or period pain.

In fact, evidence shows codeine causes headaches when people become addicted.

"They are trying to introduce policy by chequebook by donating large amounts to state and federal parties to gain open access to decision makers," he said. A check of the Australian Electoral Commission website shows the Pharmacy Guild of Australia has donated nearly \$340,000 to Labor and the Coalition in the last two financial years.

Painaustralia CEO Carol Bennett says instead of pills, Australia needs a co-ordinated pain management strategy.

Waiting lists to see expert pain doctors are over three years in some areas, she says.

Europe, the United Arab Emirates and Japan all require a prescription for codeine containing medicines.

Canada is also heading in a direction of requiring a prescription for products containing codeine.