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Pain specialists call for codeine ban

Medicines containing codeine should be banned from over-the-counter sales as they are not very effective, highly addictive and harmful, according to Australia and New Zealand's top pain medicine experts.

In a submission to the Therapeutic Goods Administration (TGA), the Faculty of Pain Medicine of the Australian and New Zealand College of Anaesthetists argues the widespread availability of codeine in pharmacies is a serious public health concern with increasing numbers of people misusing the medication.

The Faculty is the professional body responsible for the education, training and professional development of specialist pain medicine physicians in Australia and New Zealand.

Speaking outside a meeting of pain specialists in Adelaide, Faculty Dean Professor Ted Shipton said the submission urged the removal of codeine from schedule 3 classification – where it can be sold over-the-counter in a pharmacy – to schedule 4, where it can only be supplied with a doctor's prescription.

Professor Shipton said the move was prompted by the surge in recent years of codeine addiction among the public.

"Codeine is a weak opioid and addicts swallow dozens of these tablets a day for effect," Professor Shipton said.

Codeine is readily available from pharmacies in medications where it is commonly added to paracetamol or ibuprofen and marketed as providing stronger pain relief than either of those medicines alone.

But Professor Shipton said codeine in low doses was not an effective source of pain relief and taken in large doses can cause liver damage.

"Added in low doses to paracetamol and ibuprofen codeine is an ineffective source of pain relief, and highly addictive.

"People who are misusing these over-the-counter preparations are invariably taking very high doses of paracetamol and ibuprofen for the codeine effect and that kind of dosage can lead to serious liver damage, stomach ulcerations, renal failure and even death."

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