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Anaesthetists welcome cough medicine recall

Anaesthetists have welcomed the Therapeutic Goods Administration's decision to recall cough medicines with the ingredient pholcodine from Australian pharmacy shelves for safety reasons.

The Australian and New Zealand College of Anaesthetists (ANZCA) has been calling for a ban on pholcodine in cough mixture since 2013 because of its link to anaphylaxis, an allergic reaction that can be deadly and which is on the rise in Australia.

Many patients suffer the life-threatening condition and survive due to swift diagnosis and excellent resuscitation by their anaesthetist.

"Having an anaesthetic is very safe for most people and is getting safer all the time," said ANZCA's Safety and Quality Committee chair Associate Professor Dr Joanna Sutherland.

Anaesthetists say that pholcodine, which until the recall has been found in more than 50 over-the-counter cough mixtures in Australia, sensitises some people to the muscle relaxants anaesthetists use to ensure patients do not move during surgery. New Zealand restricted cough medicines with pholcodine to prescription only last year and the ingredient is banned from use in cough medicines in the US and parts of Scandinavia.

Sensitised people who are injected with muscle relaxants before surgery can then suffer a perioperative anaphylaxis, a life-threatening emergency with symptoms including breathing problems, a skin rash, very low blood pressure or even cardiac arrest.

Anaesthetists first called for a pholcodine ban in 2013 and again in 2015 – a proposal that was rejected by the TGA.

"Generally, the small number of people who die as a result of anaesthesia are those having emergency surgery and include the elderly, who are often frail, and people with complicated medical conditions," A/Professor Sutherland explains.

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“But anaphylaxis can kill patients who are otherwise young and fit, suddenly and unexpectedly. Their first attack of anaesthetic anaphylaxis can also be their last. This is why we called for pholcodine to be banned.

“We welcome the decision by the TGA to remove pholcodine-containing products from pharmacy shelves. We also echo the TGA’s calls for patients to advise their doctors and pharmacists of any prior pholcodine use ahead of undergoing any anaesthesia.”

In December 2022 the European Medicines Agency recommended that treatments containing pholcodine, which is used in adults and children to treat dry coughs, should be withdrawn from sale.

"Use of pholcodine in the 12 months before general anaesthesia ... is a risk factor for developing an anaphylactic reaction" to muscle relaxants in the anaesthetic,” it said.

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