

For discussion
on 28 June 2005

LegCo Panel on Health Services

Abuse of Cough Preparations Containing Codeine

Purpose

This paper serves to brief members on the current control of sale of cough preparations containing codeine, and on the current efforts on public education, treatment and rehabilitation in relation to substance abuse.

Background

2. Codeine is a narcotic drug widely used for its cough-suppressant properties. It is also used, to a much lesser extent, as a pain-killer. Codeine is also a drug with abuse potential. Therefore, the sale of pharmaceutical products containing codeine has been subject to control for many years.

3. In Hong Kong, codeine is mostly used in the form of liquid cough preparations containing between 4mg to 9mg of codeine per 5ml. There are 366 such preparations. All these cough preparations can only be supplied by registered medical practitioners, or by community pharmacies (“authorized sellers of poisons”)¹ under the supervision of a registered pharmacist. A doctor’s prescription is not required for the sale.

4. Unlike many other drugs of abuse, cough preparations have legitimate and common use by members of the public. In considering whether the sale of cough preparations should be further strengthened, a balance has to be struck between restricting their availability to control abuse and allowing them to be accessible by members of the public for legitimate use.

¹ Authorized seller of poisons refer to a business that is entitled to conduct retail sale of drugs listed in *Part I of the Poisons List* by a registered pharmacist, or under the supervision and in the presence of a registered pharmacist, in registered premises. It is also entitled to conduct retail sale of drugs listed in Part II of the Poisons List without the supervision of a registered pharmacist.

Current Control

5. The Department of Health (DH) has always been concerned about the abuse of legitimate pharmaceutical products, particularly cough preparations containing codeine. In 1994 and in 1995, the Pharmacy and Poisons Board, a statutory body established by the Pharmacy and Poisons Ordinance (Cap. 138) to regulate pharmaceutical products, decided that the sale of such cough preparations should be tightened in view of their abuse potential. Legislative amendments were then set in motion:

- (a) As from 21 August 1995, all cough preparations containing codeine became Part I poisons, i.e. they could only be sold from community pharmacies and under the supervision of a pharmacist.
- (b) As from 1 September 1995, the maximum penalties under the Pharmacy and Poisons Ordinance in relation to illegal sale of drugs, including cough preparations, were raised from HK\$30,000 and 12 months' imprisonment to HK\$100,000 and 24 months' imprisonment.
- (c) As from 1 January 1996, the classification of preparations containing codeine at more than 0.1% was further upgraded to become Part I, First Schedule poisons, i.e. in addition to the requirements described in (a) above, a record must be kept of every sale transaction in respect of the name and address of the purchaser, and the name and quantity of the cough preparation sold. In addition, purchasers were also required to provide their identity card number to be entered into the record of sale with effect from the same date.

Monitoring of sale

6. Every authorized seller of poisons is required to obtain a licence prior to commencement of business. The licensing authority is the Pharmacy and Poisons Board. The Board will only issue a licence to applicants who have adequate experience, knowledge and a good track record related to the sale of medicines. The Pharmacy and Poisons Board has also promulgated a Code of Practice for authorized sellers of poisons. The Code sets out the requirements to be followed, including professional independence of the registered pharmacist, publicity for services provided, and the working conditions of the premises.

7. Law enforcement activities against the illegal sale of medicines are

carried out by the pharmacist inspectors. These activities take the form of inspection, test-purchases and prosecution of offenders. Each community pharmacy is inspected twice a year on average, with a higher frequency of inspection being conducted at those with a poorer record of law compliance. Test-purchases are conducted at all community pharmacies, and those which are found to be contravening the Ordinance will be prosecuted. A DH hotline (2572 2068) is set up for the public to provide information on the illegal sale of drugs. DH follows up with investigations and prosecutions when evidence of an offence is detected.

8. As regards convictions, the actual fines related to illegal sale of cough preparations in the past three years ranged between \$1,000 and \$25,000. Convicted offenders will be subject to disciplinary sanctions of the Disciplinary Committee of the Pharmacy and Poisons Board, which may result in a warning or the suspension or cancellation of their licences. In 2004, the number of test-purchases and prosecutions related to cough preparations was 679 and 10 respectively.

Treatment, rehabilitation and public education in relation to substance abuse

9. The Administration has developed an effective multi-pronged approach to tackle drug abuse problem. The Narcotics Division under the Security Bureau works closely with various sectors in the areas of preventive education and publicity, treatment and rehabilitation, among other control and preventive work.

10. According to the Central Registry of Drug Abuse, which is a voluntary drug abuse report system maintained by the Statistics Unit of the Security Bureau, cough medicine is not a common type of abuse substance among other psychotropic substances being abused, though an increasing trend is noted since 2001. In 2004, 647 cases involving abuse of cough medicine were reported to the Registry.

11. Hong Kong adopts a multi-modality approach in provision of drug treatment and rehabilitation services for drug abusers, including people abusing cough medicine. They can approach the following types of services, which are run/subvented by DH, Social Welfare Department, the Hospital Authority and NGOs, for advice and services:-

- 42 voluntary residential drug treatment and rehabilitation centres operated by 17 non-government organisations;

- five counseling centres for psychotropic substance abusers which provide counseling services to individuals, their families and target groups like schools and allied health professionals; or
- five substance abuse clinics under the Hospital Authority, which accept referrals from counseling centres, voluntary agencies and other health care providers.

12. In respect of public education, the Narcotics Division also works closely with Action Committee Against Narcotics (ACAN)², NGOs and various government departments in promoting anti-drug education among young people. In 2004, community organizations conducted 20 anti-drug projects with funding allotted by the Government. The Narcotics Division places strong emphasis on the vulnerability of young people to the menace of drug. A cross-curricular approach is adopted by schools in promoting drug education. Relevant topics have been incorporated into subjects including general studies in primary level, social studies, economics and public affairs, and science and chemistry at the secondary level. Extra-curricular activities are conducted to complement the promotion of drug education. Life skills training for pupils and counseling services are also provided.

13. In a bid to further strengthen the provision of drug education for young people in schools, the Narcotics Division has extended school talk service to local schools serving students of South Asian origin, and has enhanced liaison with police school liaison officers to promote anti-drug messages in the classroom.

14. The Administration is aware of the trend of abuse of codeine preparations as revealed by the Central Registry of Drug Abuse. The Administration is also closely monitoring the sale of pharmaceutical products containing codeine and will step up enforcement actions to curb their illegal sale.

15. Members are invited to note the content of this paper for discussion.

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² ACAN is a non-statutory body to advise the Government on policy relating to prevention and control of drug abuse.