



Raising awareness of codeine risks

- ★ Codeine is widely used to treat pain, yet there is growing concern over levels of misuse and dependence. **Dr Marie Claire Van Hout** and **Margaret Walsh** tell us about the CODEMISUSED project's work in building understanding of levels of misuse and raising awareness of the issue amongst pharmacists, medical practitioners, the general public and policy-makers

A treatment for mild and moderate pain, codeine is the most commonly consumed opiate in the world, with global demand having risen by approximately 27 percent over the last two decades.

However, concerns have been raised about levels of misuse, and this is the focus of the CODEMISUSED project, a collaborative study bringing together pharmacies and scientific researchers in Ireland, the UK and South Africa. "The wider goal of the project is to raise awareness of the issue of codeine misuse amongst both the general public and policy-makers," says Dr Marie Claire Van Hout, the project's Principal Investigator. While codeine-containing products are advised for mild to moderate pain relief over the short term, they are habit-forming, so users are advised to be cautious. "Codeine use may be habit-forming, even at regular doses," stresses Dr Van Hout.

Misuse and dependence

Many people are not fully aware of how addictive codeine is however, and while they may start by using it as a treatment for pain, this can eventually slip into misuse and dependence. The line between therapeutic and non-therapeutic use of codeine is not always easy to distinguish though. "Somebody who starts using codeine will initially go and buy it over the counter (OTC), and use it to relieve short-term pain. They become misusers at the point when they're not following the advice on correct and safe usage," says Margaret Walsh, Project Manager. This misuse can take several different forms. "It could be somebody who uses codeine-containing products for too

long, it could be somebody who uses excessive doses, or it could be somebody who takes the correct dose but uses it longer than is advised," says Dr Van Hout.

There are cases where people use codeine-containing products to manage anxiety or stress, while there are also problem users who take them to become intoxicated. The diversity of the population which uses codeine-containing products is one of the factors which makes it difficult to get accurate figures on levels of misuse. "CODEMISUSED was really designed to try and understand levels of misuse a bit better, and also to inform national policies and the regulatory authorities," outlines Dr Van Hout. Policy on OTC access to codeine-containing

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products varies across the EU and other regions in the world. They can now also be purchased online, and this is another factor contributing to increased concern around potential misuse. "Global awareness about issues around habit forming use of codeine and the potential for misuse is rising," says Dr Van Hout.

The project aims to help further raise awareness of the issue by quantifying the extent of both therapeutic and non-therapeutic use, misuse and dependence in three different regulatory regimes, namely Ireland, the UK and South Africa. The project is organised into twelve work packages, with data being gathered from

several different sources. "We reviewed the existing literature, and surveyed pharmacists, prescribers and customers in each country to get their perspectives. We also worked with addiction treatment providers and interviewed individuals in treatment," says Dr Van Hout. "There was also an internet monitoring exercise, with monitoring conducted on drug fora, online pharmacies and social media, and we consulted with experts in each country around innovations and best practice."

This data gave researchers a firm foundation on which to delve deeper into the issues surrounding codeine use. From interviews with individuals in treatment, researchers gained new insights into the underlying factors leading to misuse and

dependence. "A lot of the people we interviewed who ended up misusing codeine and getting treatment said that, within a day or two of starting to take it, they recognised that they liked the effect," explains Dr Van Hout. Once an individual has got into the habit of taking a codeine-containing product, it's very difficult to break, particularly if it's associated with pleasurable effects. "A painkiller makes you feel good, it makes you relax and sleep well, so why wouldn't you take another?" points out Dr Van Hout. "A lot of individuals would take them first thing in the morning, before anything else, so the habit becomes part of the daily routine."



There is a growing recognition of these risks, and a number of countries have taken measures to limit the potential for codeine misuse, including restricting advertising and removing codeine-containing products from self-selection. However, while there is an abundance of anecdotal evidence that the misuse of codeine products is a significant issue, Dr Van Hout says clear, rigorous data are essential to effective policy-making. "National regulators will say; 'so, how many people are misusing in each country?' If you can't answer that, then they have no indication of the scale of the issue," she points out. The project will make an important contribution in these terms, providing a clear evidence base on the nature and extent of codeine misuse. "We're publicising our research in each country and bringing it to the attention of policy-makers," continues Dr Van Hout.

Information availability

A clear finding that has emerged from the project is that many of the individuals who have misused codeine-containing products or become dependent believe not enough information is available on the risks. The deregulation of OTC codeine-containing medicines in some countries has led to increased choice, and the ease with which they can be purchased may give users a false perception of the risks associated with consuming codeine over the longer term. "More people are using codeine-containing products nowadays, perhaps because they're more readily accessible," says Walsh. With greater levels of use, there is a corresponding need to heighten awareness among the wider public of how codeine-containing

products can be used safely. "We aim to help educate the general public about the general effects of over-use," continues Walsh.

The project also aims to work with pharmacists and manufacturers to establish realistic guidelines that can help limit the potential for misuse. One major issue is that in many countries pharmacies aren't centralised, so it's difficult to monitor levels of use. "People can go from one pharmacy to the next and stock up. Pharmacists are aware of this, so they would maybe sell a product on a one-off basis and advise the customer, but they know that that customer can then go to the next pharmacy and do it again," says Dr Van Hout. The ultimate goal for the project is to develop innovations that support customers and empower pharmacists. "This is about empowering pharmacists, so they can see what's going on with levels of codeine use," says Walsh.

"The challenge for policy-makers and practitioners is how to ensure the availability of codeine-containing products for therapeutic use but minimise the risk of misuse," says Walsh. "CODEMISUSED identified and documented some possible opportunities for innovations across the EU and beyond regarding Manufacturing (e.g., package sizes, labelling, tamper-proof); Product Information and Public Education; Training of Pharmacy Staff for Responsible Prescribing; Monitoring and Surveillance; Dispensing, Screening and Brief Interventions in Community Pharmacies; Safety in the Workplace and on the Road; Internet Supply of Codeine and Technological Support; Treatment of Codeine Dependence; Learning Resources and Training for Health Professionals."

At a glance

Full Project Title

Over the Counter Codeine Use, Misuse and Dependence (CODEMISUSED)

Project Objectives

The CODEMISUSED project aims to carry out a national and international collaborative study to estimate levels of therapeutic and non-therapeutic codeine use, misuse and dependence in partner countries from a variety of sources and perspectives.

Project Funding

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Project Partners

- Waterford Institute of Technology, Ireland <https://www.wit.ie/>
- King's College London, UK <http://www.kcl.ac.uk/index.aspx>
- South African Medical Research Council, South Africa <http://www.mrc.ac.za/>
- CARA Pharmacy Group, Ireland <https://www.carapharmacy.com/>
- Weldricks Pharmacy Ltd., UK <https://www.weldricks.co.uk/>
- The Local Choice Pharmacy Group, South Africa <http://thelocalchoice.co.za/>

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Margaret Walsh is Project Manager of the CODEMISUSED project. She is responsible for managing this portfolio of research with a value of €2.04m and a consortium of 28 researchers across Ireland, the UK and South Africa. She holds a Master of Business Degree and a Bachelor of Arts Degree.

Dr Marie Claire Van Hout PhD is the Principal Investigator of the CODEMISUSED project. She has over 15 years experience in the field of substance misuse, participatory health, pharmaco and addict-vigilance.



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