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DOCTORS TELL CODEINE USERS: GET HELP NOW

Queenslanders who regularly use over-the-counter codeine medicines for pain relief are being urged to see their GP as soon as possible.

All codeine-based products – including Panadeine, Mersyndol and Nurofen Plus – will be banned from sale without prescription from February 1 next year.

AMA Queensland fears some patients may unwittingly have become addicted to the drug and wants all regular users to visit a doctor urgently to discuss their health issues.

Dr Richard Kidd, Chair of AMA Queensland's Council of General Practice, said codeine could kill.

"Codeine can be a dangerous and highly addictive drug, but many people wrongly believe it's safe because it can be purchased over-the-counter," Dr Kidd said.

"It is closely related to morphine and can lead to opioid addiction and poisoning if taken often.

"Fortunately, there are safer and more effective alternatives available at pharmacies.

"If someone feels dependent on codeine they should book a GP appointment today so their condition can be properly diagnosed and treated."

Medicine watchdog the Therapeutic Goods Administration ruled the drug should be restricted because of mounting evidence of codeine addiction and poisoning in Australia.

Research published in the *Medical Journal of Australia*¹ found codeine toxicity contributed to 1,437 deaths between 2000 and 2013 and was the underlying cause of death in 113 cases.

Long-term use of codeine products containing paracetamol or ibuprofen can result in liver damage, internal bleeding, kidney failure and even heart attacks.

Codeine withdrawal symptoms include head and muscle aches, which cause some patients to revert to taking the drug in greater and more frequent doses believing they are still ill.

The US, Germany and Japan have already banned over-the-counter sales of codeine and in September Canada announced it intended to do so.

Media Contacts: Stuart Sherwin, Sequel PR – 0403 090 914 or 07 3251 8144

Chiara Lesèvre, AMA Queensland - 0419 735 641 or 07 3872 2209

¹ **Trends and characteristics of accidental and intentional codeine overdose deaths in Australia** (Amanda Roxburgh, Wayne D Hall, Lucinda Burns, Jennifer Pilgrim, Eva Saar, Suzanne Nielsen and Louisa Degenhardt), *Medical Journal of Australia*, October 2015