

FORWARD THINKING URGED IN ALPRAZOLAM SCHEDULE CHANGE

Pharmacists are urged to begin planning now for the rescheduling of alprazolam as a Schedule 8 poison on 1 February next year.

The largely unprecedented change will have an impact on pharmacies including legal requirements and possible security implications.

When alprazolam becomes a Schedule 8 poison all existing stocks must be stored in a compliant narcotic safe and prescribing will become subject to requirements for Schedule 8 treatment permits. Alprazolam, available as a range of brand names including Xanax and Kalma, is currently a Schedule 4 prescription medicine used for the management of anxiety and panic disorder.

Evidence of widespread misuse, increased toxicity, misuse with opioids and greater likelihood of diversion from licit to illicit use compared with other benzodiazepines are among the reasons given for the national rescheduling decision. As the Guild's National President George Tambassis explains, an increasing amount of misuse and abuse of alprazolam, particularly in its 2mg tablet form, has necessitated a reclassification of what is now regarded as an over-prescribed drug.

"Around 20 years ago flunitrazepam or Rohypnol was rescheduled from Schedule 4 to a Schedule 8 poison in response to high levels of misuse and criminal activity surrounding the drug. That was the first of the benzodiazepines to be reclassified into Schedule 8. No other benzodiazepines have been reclassified since," George says. "Since the mid-2000s, the misuse of alprazolam has reached the extent where its misuse has far outweighed what the misuse of flunitrazepam ever was. There are far more forged prescriptions for this drug than any other prescription medicine. Trafficking and unlawful diversion of the drug are also commonly reported".

In the lead up to the rescheduling, it is anticipated that attempts to obtain alprazolam by means of doctor shopping, false representation, forged prescriptions and theft may increase. Pharmacists are urged to be especially vigilant about possible forged prescriptions and other issues relating to the supply of alprazolam 2mg tablets.

Pharmacists can also perform a role in alerting prescribers about the forthcoming rescheduling in order to plan now for the likely impact of the change and thereby minimise the potential impact on patients and prescribers.

Special restrictions have been applied around the prescribing of alprazolam in Tasmania for several years now, despite its Schedule 4 status. A medical practitioner has required authority to prescribe where there has been concurrent prescription of opioids, including when a patient is being treated on the opioid pharmacotherapy program.

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What to do before 1 February 2014

- ☞ Be alert for attempts by patients to obtain multiple repeats or too-frequent supplies of alprazolam in order to accumulate supplies.
- ☞ Be familiar with and observe the requirements of Poisons Regulation 46(3-5) in respect of restrictions on dispensing intervals.
- ☞ Be alert for excessive or too-frequent prescribing of alprazolam in order to enable patients to accumulate supplies.
- ☞ Examine prescriptions for alprazolam (especially 2mg tablets) as though the drug is already in Schedule 8. Contact purported prescribers to verify prescriptions from unfamiliar prescribers.
- ☞ Review current storage locations for alprazolam to ensure the drug is not stored in an area that can be readily identified by customers in the pharmacy. Previous experiences with temazepam capsules suggest that known storage locations can precipitate opportunistic thefts and/or ram raids.
- ☞ Avoid purchasing large amounts of alprazolam ahead of 1 February 2014 and/or ensure there is sufficient space in the Schedule 8 safe to store all stocks of alprazolam from that date.