



Department of Health

Secretary

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Ms Emily Pearson
Coroner's Registrar
Coroner's Court of Victoria
100 Grenville Street South
BALLARAT VIC 3350

Dear Ms Pearson

Court reference: COR 2012 002 188 Investigation into the death of [REDACTED]

I write in response to your letter dated 27 August 2013 regarding Coroner Michelle Hodgson's recommendation to the Department of Health in relation to the above case.

Thank you for raising the serious issue of the potential for misuse by carers of palliative drugs left unused when the person they were caring for passes away. The department's response to the Coroner's recommendation is as follows:

Coroner's recommendation:

The Victorian Department of Health consider consulting with relevant bodies whose members have contact with the family of the deceased after a death, such as Victoria Police, Ambulance Victoria and the Royal Australian College of General Practitioners, to identify any appropriate opportunities to retrieve medications (particularly Schedule 8 opioids) that have been prescribed to the deceased thus reducing harms associated with other people accessing and using those medications.

Department's response:

The Department of Health administers the *Drugs, Poisons and Controlled Substances Act 1981* (the Act) and its regulations to protect the public from drug related harm. The Act empowers the Department to implement certain safeguards and controls over industry, health services and professional groups that prescribe medication. However, the department has no explicit authority with regard to individual members of the general public, concerning medications that were legally supplied on prescription.

In response to the Coroner's recommendation, the department has engaged with the Royal Australian College of General Practitioners (RACGP) and General Practice Victoria, neither of which has yet addressed this issue with general practitioners. The department will provide the Coroner's finding to the RACGP so that they can consider the role and responsibilities of GPs in relation to the recommendation and develop guidelines, as appropriate.

The department has also contacted Victoria Police and Ambulance Victoria as suggested by Coroner Hodgson. However, as retrieval of unused medications is not an appropriate role for police or ambulance officers to perform when attending the scene of a reported death, neither of these organisations has developed a policy in relation to this issue.

Another important group with regard to this issue are community pharmacists, as they are the group that dispenses these palliative medications. From the outset, they are the professionals in the best position to engage and educate both patients and carers to return any unused medications.

Accordingly, the Department has engaged with the two key peak bodies for the profession: the Pharmacy Society of Australia and the Pharmacy Guild of Australia. It appears that certain policies and resources already exist to assist pharmacists to dispose of any drugs that are returned. However, the department will pass on the Coroner's recommendation and encourage these organisations to take an 'early intervention approach' to resource and encourage pharmacists to educate patients and carers of the need to return unused medications, from the time that the first prescriptions are presented.

If you require any further information, please contact Mr Matthew McCrone, Chief Officer, Drugs and Poisons Regulation on 9096 5066, or email Matthew.McCrone@health.vic.gov.au.

Yours sincerely



Dr Pradeep Philip
Secretary