Healthcare Innovations
How practice has changed

HERSTON HEALTH PRECINCT SYMPOSIUM 2021

6 - 10 September 2021
Education Centre
RBWH

TRAN-0015

Bringing Pain Home – Medication Labelling in a Modern World?

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Background - The opioid crisis has led to a focus on opioid stewardship in hospitals. It is also essential that patients have appropriate instructions to follow to ensure judicious use at home to avoid medication misadventure.

Studies have identified that patient centred labels improve a patient's ability to describe appropriate use of their medication. Current pharmaceutical body guidelines suggest using *patient friendly techniques* on dispense labels – but all fail to provide specific recommendations for how labels should be composed.

Purpose – An audit to assess the 'patient-centred' qualities of dispensing labels placed on pain relief medication at *Surgical, Treatment and Rehabilitation Service* (STARS).

AUSTRALIAN COMMISSION ON SAFETY AND QUALITY IN HEALTH CARE

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"imperative to act, and act now, based on current evidence that 50% of consumers in Australia cannot understand their pharmacy dispensing labels" – ACSQH, Nov 2013

A Patient-Centred Label? – Resources such as the *Australian Commission on Safety and Quality in Health Care* National Road Table Report from 2013 titled 'Improving the safety and quality of pharmacy dispensing labels' provide explicit and evidence-based recommendations for composing dispensing labels.

The author of this study identified 5 key components essential to composing a 'patient-centred' dispensing label for pain medications.

Patient-Centred Requirement	Example
Indication	*"for severe pain"*
Use digits rather than words	*"1 tablet"* not *"one tablet"*
Maximum dose	*"no more than 4 tablets in 24 hours"*
Hourly frequency rather than number of times daily	*"… repeat after 6 hours"* not *"4 times daily"*
Explicit instructions, information presented in lists	Refer to *Image 1*.

Method – Report generated of all pain medications dispensed from STARS pharmacy in March of 2021 using hospital dispensing software *iPharmacy*. Instructions on each label reviewed to identify which of the above requirements were met, and results recorded and analysed using *Microsoft Excel*.
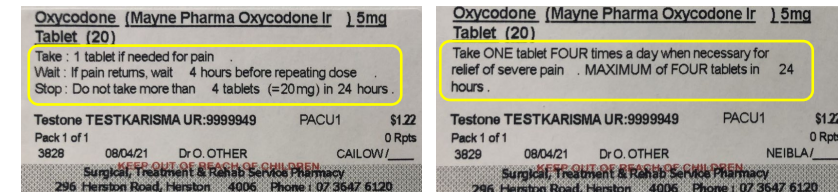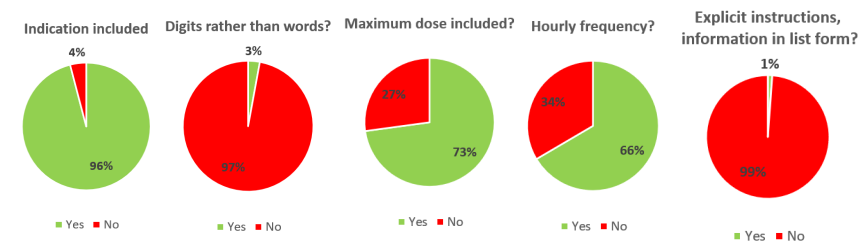

Image 1 – Information on dispensing label presented in list form with explicit instructions (left) vs traditional presentation (right)

Results

Conclusion – It is evident that some features on current STARS pain medication labels follow patient-centred techniques. However, likely in part due to a lack of formal guidance from governing pharmaceutical bodies, there a significant gaps where patient-centred techniques are not currently employed.

This audit demonstrates a clear need for standardised medication labels which follow evidence-based patient-centred techniques to improve patient comprehension of pain relief instructions.