

Policy for the issue of permits to prescribe Schedule 8 poisons

Introduction

The Victorian Drugs, Poisons and Controlled Substances (DPCS) legislation^{1,2} sets out certain circumstances when a practitioner must obtain a permit to prescribe a Schedule 8 poison (S8). These are substances which should be available for use but require restrictions on supply to minimise abuse, misuse and dependence³.

Generally a permit is required for any treatment of a drug dependent person, treatment with a S8 for more than eight weeks (including any period of treatment provided by another practitioner), or any treatment with methadone, dexamphetamine or methylphenidate. There are exceptions to these general obligations however. It is the responsibility of the practitioner to know if they are required by the legislation to hold a permit in a particular case.

This document sets out the policies of the Drugs and Poisons Regulation Group (DPRG) when assessing an application from a practitioner for a permit to prescribe a S8. Information about a practitioner's obligations under the legislation, including downloadable copies of this and other departmental policies and other information about drugs and poisons controls in Victoria can be obtained by calling the DPRG on 1300 364 545, or from the DPRG website at <http://www.health.vic.gov.au/dpu>. The department has also developed advice sheets concerning different aspects of treatment with S8s, including recognising behaviours indicative of substance abuse. These advice sheets can also be obtained from the DPRG website.

The Medical Practitioners Board of Victoria also provides information about the legislation and aspects of treatment with drugs of dependence at its website <http://medicalboardvic.org.au/content.php?sec=44>

The role of the DPRG

The requirement for a permit recognises the special risks associated with S8s, and the consequent need to coordinate treatments between practitioners to minimise these risks to patients.

The requirement for a permit for treatment with a S8 assists

to coordinate treatment and minimise the risk of concurrent treatment of a patient with the same or similar S8 by different practitioners. The department is not in a position to make clinical judgements in a particular case and does not offer clinical advice to a practitioner. The issue of a permit by the department is not an endorsement of treatment. The responsibility for assessing the appropriateness of treatment of a patient rests with the applicant practitioner in a particular case.

On receiving an application for a permit to prescribe, the DPRG accesses a database which has a history of current or past permits, notifications of drug dependency and other information obtained from medical practitioners and pharmacists. Some of this information may be relevant to the current applicant and is normally provided to assist the applicant to make legal, safe and effective treatment decisions.

The DPRG is also aware of certain relevant references and clinical guidelines, such as the Analgesic Therapeutic Guidelines (ATG)⁴, the Australian Pain Society (APS) guidelines⁵ and the Australian and New Zealand College of Anaesthetists Acute Pain Management: Scientific Evidence (2005) (ANZCA SE)¹³. The DPRG has access to departmental medical officers and experts in the field of treatment of conditions where S8s are prescribed, and in treatment of drug dependent patients.

These, and other points of reference, have assisted the department to develop policies that guide the processing of applications to prescribe, and the decision to issue or revoke a permit, or to refuse an application.

The overriding goal at all times is to maximise patient safety and to minimise the risks of developing or maintaining dependence or the diversion of licit drugs for illicit purposes.

The policies described below indicate the position the DPRG will generally adopt when an application is received. Applicants are encouraged to contact the DPRG on 1300 364 545 to discuss a particular case with a Drugs and Poisons Officer if necessary.

Specific policies

1. Relevant history

Normally the clinical judgement of the practitioner will be accepted when assessing applications. Where an application is received and:-

- i. the drug is indicated for the specified diagnosis for that patient, and
- ii. is within the normal therapeutic dose range, and
- iii. there is no history of previous permits or notifications

the permit will generally be issued with no further contact with the applicant.

Where the DPRG has information about past permits or notification of drug dependency for that patient or other information that might be relevant to the current application and the applicant may not be aware of, this information is normally conveyed to the applicant. The applicant will be given the opportunity to consider the proposed treatment in light of this information.

Where there is:-

- i. a current, active permit in place for either the same or a different S8, and/or,
- ii. a history of permits for opioid replacement therapy (ORT) or notifications of drug dependence or suspected unlawful behaviour associated with prescription medications, and/or,
- iii. concern about an aspect of the application that may compromise the safety of the patient,

the practitioner will normally be contacted. Before a permit is issued in these cases, the DPRG will seek from the applicant sufficient information to demonstrate that adequate consultation with colleagues has occurred to give confidence safe, coordinated and appropriate treatment will be delivered.

Generally, a permit for the same drug or similar will not be issued to more than one practitioner concurrently unless it is clear to the DPRG that adequate communication between the practitioners has occurred and ongoing treatment will be coordinated.

2. Incomplete applications

The DPCS Regulations (2006)² stipulate the information that must be provided when applying for a permit to prescribe a

S8. Applications may be processed only if the information required by the legislation is supplied by the applicant. It is not appropriate for the DPRG to obtain information on behalf of applicants.

When an incomplete application is received the applicant will be asked to provide the information required to complete the application. The processing of the application will be suspended until either:-

- i. the applicant provides the required information and the processing of the application can proceed or,
- ii. 10 working days elapse and the required information has not been received. In this case the applicant will be advised that the application has been cancelled. A new application will be necessary if the permit is still required.

It should be noted that applications signed by practitioners are legal documents and information supplied must be correct (see s49 of DPCS Act).

In the case of ORT applications, the department considers it essential for the safe treatment of patients transferring from one practitioner to another that the drug, dose and date of last dose be obtained by direct contact with the most recent dosing point. Where possible the previous practitioner should also be contacted by the applicant to be advised that the patient has transferred, and to seek any relevant information that may assist with treatment.

3. Applications to treat pain with opioids

Before prescribing opioids.

The ATG⁴ state that starting opioids is not a trivial decision, and opioids should not be commenced unless the practitioner knows the patient and understands their psychosocial situation. The APS guidelines advise that it is essential that all reasonable attempts be made to achieve a diagnosis for the cause of the pain, including nociceptive, neuropathic and psychological contributions.

It is important that practitioners know how to recognise problematic behaviour that is symptomatic of substance abuse disorder, and be equipped to manage it when prescribing opioids.

Concurrent prescribing.

The APS guidelines⁵ state that it is important that only one practitioner prescribes opioids for a patient and assesses the response.

Where a current permit is held by another practitioner the applicant will be advised to make contact with that permit holder to coordinate treatment. Generally concurrent permits will not be issued. An exception might be made where there is close cooperation between practitioners.

If more than one permit is to be issued, it is the responsibility of the applicant to demonstrate that adequate consultation and coordination will be in place during the period of treatment.

Long term use

The APS guidelines⁵ state that all patients who are considered for long term use of opioids in non-malignant pain should be assessed at some stage in a specialist pain management centre. Further, stable patients should be reviewed annually, otherwise more frequent assessments will be necessary. The prescribing doctor should review monthly.

Because of the department's role in minimising the risk of dependence, clarification may be sought from applicants about the level of specialist support they have obtained when considering long term opioid treatment. Applicants may be referred to the APS guidelines, particularly where the guidelines advise that a specialist should be involved in ongoing management with opioids. An applicant may be advised to consult a specialist in addiction medicine:

- i. where there is evidence of dose escalation over time, or
- ii. if the department receives information that a patient is seeking treatment from other practitioners, or
- iii. if notifications of drug dependence are received,

Opioid treatment in patients with previous ORT permits or notifications.

The ATG⁴ provide advice to practitioners about the use of opioid analgesics in opioid dependent patients or patients with substance misuse disorder.

The ATG⁴ advise that due to the difficulties of treating opioid dependent patients with opioids, early advice from a pain or addiction specialist may be required. The ATG advise that patients recovering from opioid dependence pose additional problems, and that regular assessment of treatment, as well

as coordination with the patient's drug treatment team and carers is advised.

A history of drug dependence does not preclude the use of opioids to treat pain, but generally it is advisable that practitioners should have consulted a specialist in addiction medicine before deciding on treatment. Evidence of such consultation should be provided with the application. If it is not provided with the application the applicant may be contacted to determine whether specialist advice has been obtained.

Applications for injectable opioids for chronic pain

The APS guidelines state that *"There is agreement internationally and within Australia that intra-muscular opioids should play no part in the treatment of chronic nonmalignant pain. In particular intra-muscular pethidine should be avoided"*.

The APS guidelines advise that sustained release oral or transdermal opioid preparations are the drugs of choice in patients with chronic non-malignant pain, because of their single or twice daily dosage and stable blood concentrations as a consequence of their more predictable pharmacokinetics. These guidelines go on to state that intramuscular opioids should play no part in the treatment of chronic non-malignant pain⁵. Any proposed use of injectable opioids in a chronic pain management plan would generally need the support of expert opinion to be approved.

Pethidine

Given the expert advice on the subject, generally applications for pethidine to treat chronic pain will be refused. If an applicant concludes that special circumstances apply in a particular case he or she should contact the DPRG to discuss the case. The department would expect that the applicant is able to show that there are justifiable circumstances, and preferably that expert opinion supports the treatment in the particular case.

Applications for opioids to treat migraine

The ANZCA SE state that opioids have limited benefit in the treatment of migraine and their use is not recommended.

Pethidine may be particularly problematic due to its high level of risk of dependency. Generally applications to begin treatment for migraine with pethidine will be refused unless supported by a specialist opinion.

4. Applications for stimulants.

Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder

The legislation^{6,7} provides for an exemption from the requirement for a permit for practitioners treating Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) with stimulant S8s where the patient is under the age of 18 years and the treating practitioner is a paediatrician or a psychiatrist. In these cases the treating practitioner must make a notification of treatment (a s34D notification) by completing Section 3 of the S8 permit application.

The s34D exemption from holding a permit does not apply to adult ADHD patients. The department takes the view, however, that specialist involvement in treatment is necessary for ongoing management of all ADHD patients. General Practitioners (GPs) will generally be issued with stimulant permits only where there is evidence of a specialist diagnosis and at least yearly reviews by a specialist.

Narcolepsy

The department has established a policy that an initial diagnosis of narcolepsy must involve a respiratory physician or a specialist in sleep disorders. A GP will generally not be issued with a permit unless the application indicates that a specialist has been consulted and endorses the treatment.

The department considers that, once narcolepsy is diagnosed, ongoing treatment by the GP is generally appropriate without further reference to a specialist, provided other risks to patient safety are not evident.

5. Applications to prescribe S8 to treat drug dependence

The use of agonist substitution therapies has been used to treat drug dependence. In the case of opioid dependence, an extensive evidence base exists for substitution therapy with methadone or buprenorphine.

The department provides extensive advice to practitioners in its Policy for Maintenance Pharmacotherapy for Opioid Dependence.¹⁰ This policy is available on request from the DPRG or at <http://www.health.vic.gov.au/dpu>. The DPRG website also contains links to the national clinical guidelines for methadone and buprenorphine (<http://www.health.vic.gov.au/dpu/downloads/guidelines-methadone.pdf>, <http://www.health.vic.gov.au/dpu/downloads/guidelines-buprenorphine.pdf>)

Substitution therapy for opioid dependence is a field that carries with it particular risks requiring either adequate training or supervision of treatment. Generally permits will only be issued to practitioners who:-

- i. have successfully completed recognised training and a test of competency, or
- ii. are deputising for a trained practitioner, or
- iii. are treating under the supervision of, or in a shared care arrangement with, a trained practitioner.

Practitioners wishing to be authorised to prescribe opioid substitution therapy should contact the DPRG on 1300 364 545.

Expert advice indicates that the evidence base for any other substitution therapies for drug dependence is inadequate. Generally permits to treat drug dependence, other than for the treatment of opioid dependence with methadone or buprenorphine, will not be issued. Applicants are invited to contact the DPRG to discuss particular cases but are advised that evidence should be provided that an expert in drug and alcohol treatment has endorsed the treatment, or that the treatment is part of a clinical trial with ethics approval.

6. Applications for treatment outside normal medical practice

Permits for the use of S8s where there is a limited evidence base, or outside common medical practice will generally not be issued unless supported by expert opinion, or as part of a clinical trial with ethics approval.

References: 1. Drugs, Poisons and Controlled Substances Act (1981). 2. Drugs Poisons and Controlled Substances Regulations (2006). 3. Standard for the Uniform Scheduling of Drugs and Poisons. 4. Analgesic Expert Group, Therapeutic Guidelines: Analgesic Version 5 Melbourne: Therapeutic Guidelines Limited (2007). 5. The use of oral opioids in patients with chronic non-malignant pain: management strategies, Graziotti and Goucke for the Directors of the Australian Pain Society (2002). 6. Section 35(2A) of the Drugs Poisons and Controlled Substances Act (1981). 7. Government Gazette G 31 5 August (1999) p 1838. 8. DHS Advice Sheet: Aid to decision making about opioid prescribing (2009). 9. DHS Advice Sheet: Treating chronic pain in patients with a history of drug dependence (2009). 10. Policy for Maintenance Pharmacotherapy for Opioid Dependence (2006). 11. DHS Advice Sheet: Pethidine injections – not for chronic pain (2009). 12. DHS Advice Sheet: Pethidine injections – not for migraines (2009). 13. Acute Pain Management: Scientific Evidence Second edition (2005): The Australian and New Zealand College of Anaesthetists and Faculty of Pain Medicine.