

THE INVOLVEMENT OF HEALTHCARE PROFESSIONALS IN THE DIVERSION OF PHARMACEUTICALS IN AUSTRALIA

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Introduction

The non-medical use of pharmaceuticals is increasing in Australia. Previous research indicates that pharmaceuticals are accessed directly from the medical system for non-medical use. However, little is known about the circumstances surrounding their diversion and in particular, the involvement of healthcare professionals (HCPs) in the supply chain.

Method

This study fills this knowledge gap in Australia by analysing court records obtained from the Australasian Legal Information Institute (AustLII) for complaints against HCPs for the misappropriation of drugs from their workplace or the inappropriate supply to the public. We developed a text mining tool that assisted us to identify 138 relevant cases.

Key Findings

Preliminary analyses indicate that there are three primary groups of HCPs who contribute to pharmaceutical diversion. The first comprises HCPs experiencing substance abuse or dependency issues who have misappropriated pharmaceuticals from their workplace to support their own use. The second involves HCPs who lack the experience, temperament or support to appropriately handle the demands of drug-seeking patients and are involved in the over-supply of medications that are ultimately being misused. The third consists of HCPs that are involved in the commercial diversion of pharmaceuticals for financial gain. Also examined are the socio-demographics of the HCPs by gender, age and profession, as well as the type of drugs diverted, scale of diversion and contributing factors.

Conclusions

The cases analysed in this study provide evidence that HCPs have a role to play in the diversion of pharmaceuticals in Australia, which manifests either due to their own substance abuse issues, challenges in handling difficult patients or the desire for financial gain.

Implications for Policy

The findings of this study should be considered when developing policies aimed at reducing the supply of pharmaceuticals from the medical system for non-medical use.

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