

Taking the Initiative to Take Back Medications

By Robyn Shalinsky, RPh

For years, unused prescription medications have been dumped in drains and in the trash, often seeping into the water supply. The U.S. Geological survey's 2002 report showed that 80 percent of surface water samples taken nationwide contained one or more pharmaceutical or personal care product compound. Along with the problem of drugs in the water, there is also a problem of unused prescription medications in households. In the United States, more than 20,000 unintentional drug poisonings occur annually.

Frankly, this is a situation that can no longer be ignored. It's important to get unused medications out of homes, but not at the risk of placing them into the

water supply. Pharmacy is a highly respected profession, and by helping solve the problems caused by unused and improperly disposed prescription medications, we can only add to our stature.

I am a pharmacist at Leiter's Pharmacy, a family-owned business in San Jose, California. Mort and Chuck Leiter, father and



FIVE STEPS FOR STARTING A TAKE-BACK PROGRAM

1. Order a collection bin. Leiter's bin (pictured above right,) is from D-Vault (www.dvault.com), and cost about \$600 plus shipping. Alternatively, ask your post office to donate an old mailbox, which can be painted.
2. Make a sign for your collection bin that states "Pharmaceutical Disposal." Laws and regulations vary by state, but more than likely you will need some sort of language indicating that you cannot accept controlled substances, sharps, or inhalers (inhalers explode in the incinerator).
3. Find out if your state defines pharmaceutical waste as medical waste or universal waste. Ask your local household hazardous waste department or health

4. Send out a press release to get local media coverage.
5. Contact your local water department, household hazardous waste, and environmental Web sites to be sure that they that you have started a drug take-back program. Also contact local hospices.

If you have questions, contact Robyn Shalinsky at Leiter's Pharmacy at rshalinsky@gmail.com or 408-292-



son, have maintained the pharmacy that Mort's father opened in 1926. The pharmacy compounds custom-made ophthalmics and other extemporaneous preparations, in addition to our regular prescription service.

We also provide service to Hospice of the Valley, a large hospice in San Jose, which was the inspiration for our medication take-back program. We were frequently asked by hospice nurses and social workers what to do with the leftover medication after a hospice patient passed away. I did some research, and found that other than the county's household hazardous waste department, there was no place within 30 miles to take unused medications. To use household hazardous waste, you must call to make an appointment, and then bring the medication to a site that changes on a weekly basis. This service is only available during a two-hour time period per week. For a family who just lost a loved one, proper disposal was inconvenient.

My goal was to establish a take-back program at Leiter's. Mort and Chuck generously agreed to support

and fund the program. Our program has been running for about a year, and we have collected more than 3,000 pounds of unused medications that would have otherwise been discarded into the water supply. Worse yet, these medications could be lingering in households in the reach of children and the elderly.

Every day, we have people walk into our pharmacy to properly dispose of their unused medications. They are very appreciative of the service. We have also seen an increase in our walk-in business and gift sales since starting the program. Our disposal program costs about \$1 per pound.

To begin your own pharmaceutical take-back program, on the following page are five steps you can follow.

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TELEOSIS LOOKS TO 'TAKE BACK' MEDICATION WASTE

By Chris Linville

To say that the environment is getting a lot of attention these days would be a major understatement. Topics such as global warming and climate change may have been relegated to scientific circles just a few years ago, but now its part of mainstream discussion. "Going Green" is certainly a concept gaining traction, and likely will continue to do so.

Less publicized as an environmental threat, but no less critical, are improperly disposed drugs, such as prescription medications. To help stem the tide of prescription medication pollution and quantify its effects, the Teleosis Institute, a Berkeley, California-based non-profit organization dedicated to sustainable medicine and a healthy environment, partnered with a dozen San Francisco Bay area pharmacies as part of its "Green Pharmacy" pilot program in 2007. The program was designed as a free and environmentally safe way to dispose of unused and/or expired medications. In the year-long pilot program, which closed on June 1, 2008, Teleosis says it collected more than 2,000 pounds of unwanted

prescription medications from the partner pharmacies.

According to Teleosis, roughly 54 percent of consumers dispose of their unused prescription medications in the trash, and 35 percent flush them down the toilet. In 2007, the Associated Press said that traces of prescription medications were found in the drinking water of 24 metropolitan cities, affecting 41 million Americans. Teleosis also reports that more than 80 percent of waterways tested in the United States show traces of common medications such as acetaminophen, hormones, blood pressure medicines, codeine, and antibiotics. The effects on aquatic life were striking. The Environmental Protection Agency found that estrogens cause male fish to become female; antidepressants cause lobsters to become more aggressive; and fluoxetine induces reproduction in shellfish.

Chris Linville is managing editor of *America's Pharmacist*.

For more statistics on medication waste, along with information about take-back programs and other environmentally-friendly initiatives, visit the Teleosis Institute Web site (www.teleosis.org/).