

Concern in Republic of Ireland as pharmacists stop dispensing methadone

15 October 2007

The Health Service Executive (HSE) in the Republic of Ireland is today working to provide contingency measures to ensure the continued supply of medication to an estimated 3,000 people receiving methadone prescriptions.

A dispute between pharmacists and the HSE over changes to the wholesale margins reducing the price for the supply of drugs and medicines to the state has led to 140 pharmacists, mainly in the greater Dublin area, stating their intention to withdraw from the Methadone Protocol from Monday 15 October.

The HSE states on its website that eleven sites in the greater Dublin area have been identified for the provision of emergency methadone services. Clients affected will be contacted and plans are being drawn up in case the action spreads nationwide.

Ross Hattaway, of the HSE's Corporate Pharmaceutical Unit, commented on the action:

It is totally unjustifiable that some health professionals would seek to threaten the well-being of vulnerable groups such as methadone patients, rather than deal with their suppliers directly. The HSE has continued to engage in dialogue with pharmacists regarding their concerns and the decision by some members of the IPU to target a group of clients, who are vulnerable and trying to get their lives back into order, is cynical and manipulative.

The Chairperson of the National Voluntary Drug Sector in Ireland, Sean Cassin, strongly condemned the action by many local pharmacists:

This is an outrageous decision by certain local pharmacists, who are clearly targeting some of their most vulnerable patients, in their dispute with the HSE.

Cassin continued:

The pharmacists provide no alternative service and the local HSE clinics are already overstretched. The National Voluntary Drug Sector is calling on the Irish Pharmaceutical Union to request their members to immediately call off this action and to ensure that those suffering from drug addiction are not threatened in this irresponsible and unethical way at any stage in the future.

The Irish Pharmaceutical Union (IPU), which represents 1,600 community pharmacists across the country, has said that responsibility for the collapse of the Methadone Scheme rests with the HSE. Michael Guckian, President of the IPU, said that the collapse of the Scheme was a consequence of the breakdown in relationships between the HSE and the pharmacy sector.

For more information please contact Ruth Goldsmith in the DrugScope Press Office on 020 7940 7517 (07736 895563 out of hours) or at press@drugscope.org.uk

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