

## Pharmacists advocating for permanency of CDSA exemption

Written by Sonya Felix on October 26, 2020 for CanadianHealthcareNetwork.ca

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Since the pandemic struck last March, pharmacists have faced a multitude of challenges as they strive to maintain continuity of care. One change meant to help pharmacists better manage patients' drug therapy is the federal government's decision to issue a short-term subsection 56(1) exemption from the Controlled Drugs and Substances Act (CDSA). And pharmacists are pushing hard to make the exemption permanent.

Pre-COVID-19, pharmacy groups were already asking government to modernize CDSA to give pharmacists greater authority to manage patients using opioids. With the pandemic dragging on, the 56(1) exemption is now extended to September 2021, giving pharmacy nearly another year to gather evidence to support making the change permanent.

For now, the temporary exemption permits pharmacists to extend and renew prescriptions, to transfer prescriptions to other pharmacists, to verbally prescribe prescriptions with controlled substances and to deliver controlled substances to patients. Each provincial authority has created their own regulations to specify how pharmacists can do this.

"There is some variation province to province but in general the change allows for continuity of care," said Sandra Hanna, CEO, Neighbourhood Pharmacies Association of Canada. "It allows for flexibility where otherwise the pharmacist's hands would be tied."

As Hanna explained, while any gaps in care are concerning, gaps in opioid therapy can have devastating consequences. "There has been a number of times as a pharmacist, my hands were tied when a patient ran out of a medication [controlled drug or substance]. Maybe they can't reach their physician, their medication was stolen or the patient threw up their dose."

Earlier this month, Hanna wrote to Michelle Boudreau, Health Canada's director general of the Controlled Substances Directorate, on behalf of Neighbourhood Pharmacies. She noted that "pharmacists are well positioned to support patients in their communities, but the expiration of the current subsection 56(1) exemption will limit the ability of pharmacists to leverage their expertise and accessibility." Neighbourhood Pharmacies recommended that Health Canada designate pharmacists as practitioners under CDSA, which would effectively make the 56 (1) exemption permanent.

"We've been doing advocacy federally and now provincially as well," Hanna said. "If the provinces find the exemption is helpful and would like to see it made permanent, that would be very important input for the federal government to hear."

Meanwhile, the Canadian Pharmacists' Association (CPhA) also welcomes the extension of the CDSA 56 (1) exemption but hopes for more. "We've done quite a lot of work advocating the Controlled Substances Directorate," said Shelita Dattani, CPhA's director of practice development and knowledge translation. "We've

been asking for years for pharmacists to have a bigger role in opioid stewardship and for modernization of the CDSA regulations. Being designated as a practitioner alone is not enough. We need evidence to show pharmacists could even do more.”

With the exemption currently in place until September 2021, CPhA is collecting evidence to show the impact the it is having on patient care. One project is a qualitative review of cutting edge opioid studies on the role of pharmacists. As well, Dattani is interviewing pharmacists across the country to talk about how the temporary change is making a difference in helping patients. “The evidence will be used to support further advocacy,” Dattani added. “This an important study and we hope to have it approved and published.”

As part of the initiative to promote a stronger role for pharmacists as opioid stewards, CPhA is hosting a webinar on October 28, 2020 to showcase the evidence so far and to explain methodologies for ongoing research. Presentations and discussions will focus on a range of issues including findings from a comprehensive scoping review on opioid stewardship interventions by pharmacists, pharmacists’ perceptions of the Canadian opioid regulatory exemptions on patient care, a review of the BC Pharmacy Association’s opioid agonist treatment training program, and an intervention to empower community pharmacists to implement opioid stewardship in acute pain. As well, Ross Tsuyuki will present the new Canadian guidelines for naloxone prescribing by pharmacists. Interested pharmacists can [register for the webinar here](#).

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