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Misuse of OTC drugs in Poland



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ABSTRACT

Introduction: The misuse of over-the-counter (OTC) drugs became a global public health concern. Although abuse with dextrometorphan (DXM), pseudoefedrine (PSD), codeine (COD) or benzydamine (BND) may lead even to psychosis, drugs containing these substances are relatively cheap and freely available. In Poland the Act on Counteracting Drug Addiction was amended in 2015, however it seems that there are still some points which could be improved.

Methods: Study was conducted between October 2014 and June 2015 using a specially designed questionnaire delivered to pharmacists from the Greater Poland region. Questionnaire consisting of 11 closed questions was distributed by direct contact and via the Internet. From over 2500 distributed questionnaires, we received 761 sheets and 680 were included.

Results: The misuse of OTC drugs is increasing in Poland from pharmacists point of view. The most popular substance was PSD followed by COD and DXM. The main reason of misuse of these drugs could be related to the use of Internet and free access to these medications. In respondents (58.2%) opinion OTC drugs containing analyzed substances should be moved into the prescription status.

Conclusions: The misuse of OTC drugs should be considered as a very dangerous phenomenon. Although the Act on Counteracting Drug Addiction was amended in Poland in 2015, there are some facets requiring improvement. Social education may play a key role in the limitation of misuse of OTC drugs.

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1. Introduction

Misuse of OTC medications became common especially among young people and the recreational use of substances which may cause: inability to concentrate, hallucinations,

dizziness, seizures, hyperexcitability and/or even psychosis has significantly increased recently [1–3]. Nevertheless, adults are also a risk group and misuse of OTC drugs among them is an important public health concern as well [1,4,5].

Use of OTC medications, notably those containing dextrometorphan (DXM), pseudoefedrine (PSD), codeine (COD) and benzydamine (BND), in recommended dosage is frequently assumed to be safe [5]. However, the misuse of these drugs has become a dangerous phenomenon

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causing side effects especially when overdosed [2]. Thus, the increasing popularity of recreational use of these substances should be considered a serious public health problem which might have significant health and economic consequences [1,6–8].

It seems that the problem of OTC drugs abuse was downplayed in many countries and was not considered as dangerous as it is nowadays [1,2]. Besides, OTC drugs used for recreational purposes are legally accessible in pharmacies and are relatively cheap. Moreover, these substances are more socially acceptable and are being indicated as safer than traditional illicit substances [1,9]. Furthermore, online access to medicines contributes to their increasing popularity [1]. In spite of the fact that misuse of OTC drugs is a global public health concern [8], preventive programs are insufficient and are not effective proportionally to the scope of the problem [10].

In Poland, drugs containing DXM, COD, PSD and BND can be freely bought in pharmacies without prescription. Thus, intoxication with OTC medications is an issue of increasing concern similarly to other countries [11]. In consideration of the problem, the Act on Counteracting Drug Addiction was amended in 2015 by Polish decision makers [12]. The key changes are: the possibility of refusing to dispense a drug to person under 18 or when the pharmacist finds that the drug may be misused. Pharmacists are obliged to inform that selected drugs may cause intoxication. Furthermore, drugs which are used recreationally may be sold only at pharmacies and mail order of these drugs has been prohibited. Failure to comply with the law is subject to a fine of up to PLN 500,000 (EUR 119,617 according to the average exchange rate in 2015 published by the National Bank of Poland; EUR 1 = PLN 4.18). Moreover, if the age of the person requesting an OTC drug which could be misused raises controversy, pharmacists are allowed to request an ID to confirm the patient's age. Apart from that, until December 2016 pharmacists will be allowed to sell only one package of drug containing DXM, COD or PSD per sale transaction, while the regulation on BND will remain unchanged. As of 1 January, 2017, the Regulation of the Minister for Health determining therapeutic doses necessary for treatment for each of the selected psychoactive substances available in OTC drugs will enter into force [12].

Although the law on misuse of OTC drugs in Poland might be considered as one of the most restrictive in Europe, it seems that there are aspects which should be taken into consideration to ensure a more effective prevention of OTC drugs abuse. Therefore, the main aim of this study was to survey Polish pharmacists on the phenomenon of drug abuse containing DXM, COD, PSD and BND. Secondary objective of this study was to verify the pharmacists' awareness and their attitude to the problem of OTC drugs misuse and to the amended law. What is also important, data on OTC drugs misuse are still insufficient, and, thus, further research in the field is needed [1,7,13,14]. To our knowledge, there were no previous analyses conducted in Poland in a similar way. Hence the importance of this study, especially taking into consideration that pharmacists might be notably cognizant of the risks associated with OTC drugs abuse and they could effectively control access to the drug [15].

Table 1
Questions used in the survey.

Question	Question text
1	Do you think that misuse of OTC drugs containing DXM, COD, PSD, BND is increasing in Poland? If the answer is "hard to say" or "disagree", please go to the third question and skip question number ten.
2	Could you indicate the main reason for misuse of OTC drugs?
3	Which substance (from analyzed drugs) is the most popular?
4	Do you sell more than one package of drugs containing the study substances?
5	Do you inform about possible side effects related to misuse of OTC drugs?
6	Do you sell these drugs to young customers when you suppose abuse?
7	Which situation (from possible variants) was observed in your pharmacy?
8	What status should the misused OTC drugs have?
9	Do you think that health policy initiatives should be undertaken to limit misuse of OTC drugs? If the answer is "disagree", please go to question eleven.
10	Please indicate up to three solutions that would be the most effective in limiting misuse of OTC drugs?
11	Do you think that, in the near future, the sales of medications containing DXM, COD, PSD, BND outside pharmacies, e.g. in vending machines or supermarkets, could increase?

Source: based on our own studies.

2. Material and methods

The study was conducted between October 2014 and June 2015 using a specially designed anonymous questionnaire comprising eleven closed-ended questions (Table 1) and a short statistical section. The time horizon was established based on the date of the entry into force (24 June, 2015) of the amendment of the Act on Counteracting Drug Addiction.

In question 1, participants were to choose from the following answers: "agree", "hard to say", "disagree". In questions 4, 9, and 11, respondents were to choose from 2 answers: "agree" and "disagree". In questions 5 and 8, participants were to choose from 3 and in questions 2, 3, 6, 7 from 4 alternatives given for a question. In question 10, there were 6 variants and respondents were to choose a maximum of 3 options (it was the only multiple choice question). Possible variants are presented in the results section and in Table 2 (question 10). The questionnaire is available upon request from the corresponding author.

The questionnaire was delivered to pharmacists from the Greater Poland region (the third largest region in Poland in terms of population density, with a population of almost 3.5 million; it covers an area of about 30,000 km² thus its area is comparable to e.g. Belgium) by direct contact and via the Internet. Over 2500 questionnaires were distributed to pharmacists (according to the information from the pharmaceutical inspectorate, there are 1340 pharmacies in Greater Poland), who were requested to return them by e-mail or by regular mail. Potential study participants were selected from the list of pharmacies in the Greater Poland. In case of no reply, the request to fill in the questionnaire would be reiterated. Some of the pharmacists refused to join the study, especially due to

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