

# REDUCING OPIOID HARM



**Media release**  
**Wednesday 2 September**

## Drug death figures show why opioid changes have been critical

The latest figures on unintentional drug deaths in Australia show why it has been so important for changes to be made to the way opioids are prescribed.

The Rural Doctors Association of Australia (RDAA) and Australian College of Rural and Remote Medicine (ACRRM) supported changes introduced in June by the Therapeutic Goods Administration (TGA), which included reduced pack sizes for opioid medications.

“The Penington Institute’s latest report on overdose deaths in Australia more than justifies the TGA’s important changes” **RDAA President, Dr John Hall, said.**

“It found that about three quarters of drug overdose deaths in 2018 were unintentional.

“Opioids like morphine and codeine topped the list as the leading cause of unintentional drug deaths.

“And per 100,000 people, the majority of unintentional drug deaths occurred outside the major cities, with regional and rural Western Australia having the highest rate across the country.

“These statistics underline just how dangerous prescription drugs like opioids can be if they are overused – and show they can be even more dangerous for rural Australians.

“There is a place for opioids in helping to manage pain – but now with the smaller pack sizes doctors are able to prescribe the appropriate amount that their patient really needs.”

**ACRRM President, Dr Ewen McPhee, said while some parallel changes made to opioid prescribing through the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme (PBS) have caused some frustrations for doctors, RDAA and ACRRM understand the intent of the new measures.**

“Under the changes, the requirement for doctors to obtain PBS authorisations for opioid prescriptions has been widened” he said. “Doctors also need to obtain an annual review by another doctor of a patient’s care plan when a patient requires opioids for longer periods due to a chronic condition.

“While these new requirements create an additional administrative burden for doctors, RDAA and ACRRM understand why they have been implemented.

“We continue to work closely with the PBS in an effort to streamline the PBS authorisations process, including by helping doctors to use its Provider Digital Access (PRODA) system to best effect in obtaining timely prescription authorities.

“There is no walking away from the fact that most unintentional drug deaths are from prescribed medications. Statistics for 2020 and beyond should reveal if the new measures have had an impact in reducing this.

“Undoubtedly, the smaller packaging requirements will enable doctors to better tailor opioid prescriptions to the needs of their patients.

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“They should also reduce the potential for misuse and the diversion of opioids to others.

“An added upside is that a reduced intake of opioids often leaves the patient feeling better.”

RDA and ACRRM have joined with the Australian and New Zealand College of Anaesthetists (ANZCA) Faculty of Pain Management to provide their rural doctor members with free access to online education on pain management. This is available via each organisation’s website. The organisations have also convened a number of webinars for members on pain management.

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**Find the Penington Institute report here:**

<https://www.penington.org.au/publications/2020-overdose-report>

**A high resolution photo of ACRRM President, Dr Ewen McPhee, is available here:**

<https://www.rdaa.com.au/documents/item/968>

**A high resolution photo of RDAA President, Dr John Hall, is available here:**

<https://www.rdaa.com.au/documents/item/687>

**Available for interview:**

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