

4 May 2015

Hon. Susan Ley
Minister for Health
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Dear Minister,

Proposed withdrawal of PBS subsidies on common analgesics

I am writing to you in response to media coverage that you are favourably considering the removal of common analgesics such as paracetamol and aspirin from the list of PBS subsidised medicines.

COTA supports regular and thorough reviews of the PBS listings to identify and remove unnecessary and costly subsidies. However, we are not convinced that paracetamol fits into that category in all situations.

As you are aware COTA Australia is the peak consumer organisation for all older Australians, including over 500,000 members of COTA member organisations and 40,000 individual members.

Older Australians are over-represented among the chronically ill, including those who suffer from the painful condition osteoarthritis (OA). Paracetamol is often used by GPs as a first line of treatment for those suffering from this disease.

We have been advised by colleague organisations that almost all paracetamol prescribed on the PBS is as a restricted benefit for OA sufferers, and most of those prescriptions are for extended-release paracetamol OA medications.

We understand that treating the pain caused by this illness requires high doses of paracetamol and therefore large numbers in each script. To require low income older Australians to purchase the amount needed over the counter will result in significant additional cost outlays for individuals with OA. Many may not be able to afford to purchase the medication, resulting in unnecessary pain and suffering.

COTA is also very concerned to ensure that older Australians requiring this type of pain relief are receiving it in the context of GP supervision and support. The prescription process, involving GPs and pharmacists, may contribute important guidance, assist in dosage management and increase treatment confidence for many older consumers.

In addition, importantly to COTA, palliative care patients also specifically benefit from paracetamol listing on the PBS.

We are also very concerned by accusations aired in the media that pensioners stockpile subsidised paracetamol in order to reach the safety net threshold to qualify for cost-free medicines. If such a practice exists, COTA agrees it is not desirable. However we have seen no evidence of this being widespread and it has never been brought to our attention in the context of our extensive involvement with programs promoting better use of medicines. To ascribe this behaviour to pensioners as a group, as the media has done, is unacceptable, and I hope you will discourage this sort of scapegoating in your public statements.

You were quoted in the media as saying that you don't want to see over-the-counter medications on script at excessive cost to the government budget when it is not necessary. COTA agrees with the sentiment. We are just not convinced that paracetamol is unnecessarily listed.

I would be happy to discuss this further with you or your staff.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'Ian Yates', written over a large, light-colored scribble or background mark.

Ian Yates AM
Chief Executive