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Concern over painkillers

■ Robert Dougherty

Codeine dependency concerns have been raised ahead of the rescheduling of the painkilling drug as prescription-only from February 1.

The over-the-counter drug is being rescheduled to prescription-only after a review by the Therapeutic Goods Administration in response to reports of misuse and toxicity.

National Rural Health Alliance chief executive Mark Diamond said people living in rural Australia needed to know their options and plan ahead.

"In many parts of the country, going to see a healthcare practitioner is not necessarily a simple matter," he said.

"For many individuals, getting assistance depends very much on what health services are actually available in the area, and planning for the time, money and logistics involved in getting there."

In TGA submissions over 18 months, it was suggested numbers of dependent patients were increasing, pharmacists were having difficulty managing challenging patients and members of the public were becoming addicted to its opioid effects for pain relief.

Pharmacy 777 Karratha pharmacist manager Gareth Galloway said Pilbara residents were well aware of the approaching deadline and were prepared.

"I haven't seen any change from last week, I think there's a fair bit of awareness in the community and that's been there for a couple of months now," he said.

"There's not been an excess sale — there are plenty of other options.

"Obviously codeine products will still be available from the doctor but there are a lot of other valuable options over the counter and I don't think that will change."

A Changes for Codeine report by Darren Roberts and Suzanne Nielsen said people with codeine dependency might not realise they had a problem and may try to stockpile the drug before February 1.

"Australian data show that the typical codeine user is well-educated and employed, and that codeine-use disorder is a largely hidden problem," the report said.

Bloodwood Tree Association chief executive Kelly Howlett said there were more significant issues with drug use in Port Hedland than codeine. "We only occasionally see clients for this," she said.