

Preventing the preventable

All drugs expose patients to a risk of adverse effects that should be managed. Patients must therefore be informed of both the likely benefits and potential harmful effects of the treatments they use.

However, some adverse effects occur as a result of medication errors, some of which continue to occur year after year, even though their causes are well known and easily preventable.

Take the case of medication errors with oral methotrexate. Fatal overdoses continue to occur with depressing regularity when patients take a weekly dose on a daily basis, although this error has been recognised for two decades, together with causes and safety solutions (see page 150 of this issue).

All healthcare professionals should feel concerned when preventable errors continue to occur and patients continue to die unnecessarily as a result.

There is a role for each player in the healthcare system, at each stage of medication provision and use, in preventing avoidable harm.

Drug companies should provide safe packaging and informative, easy-to-read patient leaflets. This is already the case for some products but it must become the rule, without further delay.

Regulatory agencies, for their part, should encourage manufacturers to focus to a greater extent on the safety of their products, identify

adverse effects linked to medication errors, and inform health professionals and patients.

Health ministries and health care service providers should issue guidelines, coordinate preventive action plans, and evaluate them regularly for effectiveness.

Healthcare professionals should provide patients with accurate, precise information on how to use each treatment, emphasize any specific risks, and explain what to do if a problem arises.

This will help patients armed with detailed information on their treatments to become empowered to better contribute to their own safety.

Mismanagement of medication errors means that patients continue to be needlessly exposed to adverse effects. If we know how to prevent such errors, continuing to ignore them and not to take the steps needed for prevention in future is tantamount to professional malpractice.

Preventing preventable medical errors is the responsibility of all, at every stage of the healthcare process. Let's start with the most obvious problem, namely life-threatening adverse effects due to errors that are both clearly identified and readily preventable.

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Attachment

2nd Open Letter to EU Commissioners Günter Verheugen and Markos Kyprianou by Health Action International, Medicines in Europe Forum, Association Internationale de la Mutualité and International Society of Drug Bulletins opposing projects to introduce industry-supported health information to the public.