

“No” to bulk bottles of loose tablets or capsules!

“Loose” commodities are defined by the Collins English Dictionary as those which are “not bundled or packaged” for transport or distribution.

This is precisely the problem with bulk bottles of loose tablets or capsules. These are dangerous commodities, which can be fatal if used incorrectly, or if swallowed surreptitiously by a child.

At home or in healthcare establishments, an important role of drug packaging is to help prevent taking the wrong medicine, and to help prevent errors involving dose or dosing interval. It should also ensure that medicines are not too easily accessible to children.

Does a bulk bottle fulfil this role? When closed and equipped with a safety cap, it does prevent easy access to the contents. But once the medicine is put in a pill box, how are the drug, the dose, and the dosing interval readily identified? Safety cap or not, once a bulk bottle is opened, it provides easy access to a large number of unit doses, along with a risk of accidental spillage.

While drug companies boast about innovation, many drugs continue to be marketed in bulk bottles, including some cytotoxics. In 2017, over the course of the year, nearly one-third of the new drugs (tablets or capsules) which *Prescrire* analysed were dispensed in bulk bottles. *Methotrexate*, a cytotoxic, had been marketed in France for about twenty years in bulk bottles, before one brand finally became available in blister packs in late 2017 (see page 95).

In the 21st century, the characteristics of high-quality packaging for oral solid formulations are widely known. It is not acceptable that pharmaceutical companies continue to use bulk bottles, even when equipped with safety caps, and that drug regulatory agencies approve this type of packaging.

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