

# Snippets

## Anticonvulsants associated with suicidality

Although the overall risk is small, healthcare professionals should closely monitor all patients currently taking or starting any anticonvulsant drug for notable changes in behaviour that could indicate the emergence or worsening of suicidal thoughts or behaviour or depression.

In January 2008, the FDA issued an alert regarding suicidality (suicidal behaviour or ideation) in patients taking anticonvulsant drugs. This came after analysing reports of suicidality from placebo-controlled clinical studies of eleven drugs used to treat epilepsy, psychiatric disorders and other conditions. The analysis found that patients taking these drugs had approximately twice the risk of suicidal thoughts and behaviours (0.43%) compared to those taking placebo (0.22%). The increased risk of suicidal behaviour and suicidal ideation was observed as early as one week after starting an anticonvulsant and continued throughout the following 24 weeks.

Patients who were treated for epilepsy, psychiatric disorders and other conditions were all at increased risk of suicidality. However, the relative risk was higher in the patients with epilepsy compared to patients who received one of the drugs for psychiatric or other conditions.

The FDA reports that it is likely that all anticonvulsants pose an increased risk for suicidality and provide the following advice for healthcare professionals:

- Be aware of the possibility of the emergence or worsening of depression, suicidality, or any unusual changes in behaviour.
- Inform patients, their families and caregivers of the potential for an increase in the risk of suicidality so they are aware and able to notify their healthcare provider of any unusual behavioural changes.

### Reference:

FDA alert, January 2008. Information for healthcare professionals: suicidality and antiepileptic drugs. Available from: <http://www.fda.gov/cder/drug/InfoSheets/HCP/antiepilepticsHCP.htm> (Accessed May 2008)

#### Anticonvulsants included in the analyses:

- Carbamazepine
- Felbamate\*
- Gabapentin
- Lamotrigine
- Levetiracetam
- Oxcarbazepine
- Pregabalin
- Tiagabine\*
- Topiramate
- Valproate
- Zonisamide\*

\*Not available in New Zealand

### PHARMAC announces subsidy changes for salbutamol inhalers

From the 1st June 2008, PHARMAC will be fully subsidising a new brand of salbutamol inhaler – Respigen (100 microgram per dose). Subsidies for the existing brands, Salamol and Ventolin, have been reduced to the same level as Respigen. The supplier of Salamol has reduced the price of the Salamol inhaler but Ventolin remains the same. This means that Salamol and Respigen inhalers are fully subsidised, with a higher part charge on Ventolin. The three brands of inhalers are therapeutically equivalent but differ slightly in appearance, taste and spray pressure.

For further information and resources on this change, contact PHARMAC by calling 0800 11 22 37 or emailing [resources@pharmac.govt.nz](mailto:resources@pharmac.govt.nz)

### The “cool” asthma device may improve adherence

New Zealand company Nexus6 Ltd has invented “Smartinhale”, a new asthma device aimed at young chronic asthma sufferers. The device fits Ventolin, Serevent and Flixotide canisters and uses digital ring tones to alert children to take their preventer. It also tracks medication use through the software contained within the device.

A study of 110 adults and adolescents with asthma found that use of the Smartinhale over 12 weeks resulted in 93% of fluticasone being taken as prescribed (250 mcg twice daily), compared to 74% in the control group who were not using the reminder function of the device. Researchers concluded that an audiovisual reminder function can significantly improve adherence to inhaled corticosteroid use in asthma.<sup>1</sup>

There is anecdotal evidence that use of the Smartinhale has led to better asthma control in children. Parents report that their children’s asthma has improved markedly since beginning to use the device and often they end up using less rescue medication.

The development of the Smartinhale was partly funded by Cure Kids, a charity which raises money to fund medical research into children’s illnesses.

Smartinhale is not funded. Smartinhale products, information and online asthma management tools are available at:

[www.smartinhale.com](http://www.smartinhale.com)

1. Charles T, Quinn D, Weatherall M et al. An audiovisual reminder function improves adherence with inhaled corticosteroid therapy in asthma. *J Allergy Clin Immunol* 2007; 119(4):811-6.