Paracetamol Availability

During my clinical placements this year, I have been shocked at the number of teenage girls admitted with paracetamol overdoses. The majority of these admissions were self-harm incidents rather than actual suicide attempts. Yet, it was only through prompt treatment, and some luck, that more of these girls didn’t lose their lives.

Sadly, I did care for a 14 year girl who ended up passing away from paracetamol poisoning. Unfortunately, she had waited nearly 2 days after taking the tablets before presenting to the ED. She had expected to just get a bit sleepy and drift off. What actually happened however, was the drug caused excruciating abdominal pain which caused her family to call an ambulance and the truth of her overdose was revealed.

By the time she reached the ED, her liver was already failing and her kidneys soon followed. I can only imagine how hard it was for her family to watch her slowly pass away over the next week and the regret she must have felt over her actions. It was such a sad situation, and one I hope I never have to witness again.

Nursing these patients made me question how appropriate the widespread availability of paracetamol actually is. It now sits on our supermarket shelves. Convenient; definitely. Safe; I’m not so sure.

When I talked to my family about this issue, the response was “well it’s only paracetamol, it can’t be that bad”. Too many people forget paracetamol is a drug. Used as directed, as with the majority of over the counter medications, it is safe and extremely effective. However, when misused, it can have very painful and even deadly consequences. Within the UK, it is the most common self-poisoning agent and paracetamol toxicity is the leading cause of acute liver failure in Australia.

What I find perplexing, is that within NSW, it is illegal to sell knives to children under the age of 16. Even the sale of spray paint is restricted to those over 18 years of age. Yet, anyone of any age can access paracetamol. Sure the packs size within supermarkets is restricted to 24 tablets, but people can buy as many packets as there is on the shelf without question, especially after the introduction of self-service terminals. Meanwhile, discount pharmacies sell packs of 100 tablets for less than the cost of a cup of coffee.

So what’s the solution to this problem? I don’t know, that’s for brighter minds than mine to discover. I do believe, however, that the solution needs to focus on education. Education on how to safely take this drug, as well as the consequences of over-dosing. We need to teach the public just how serious paracetamol poisoning is and the necessity of accessing treatment as soon as possible if an over-dose does occur. This education needs to include teenagers, adults, parents, grandparents and retailers.

As nurses, we need to take every opportunity we can to provide this education. From a child admitted with a fever to an elderly lady with osteoarthritis, educating the patients we are already treating has to be the easiest way to start solving this problem.
Life Lessons from the Emergency Department

As you may well imagine, spending 12 weeks in 3 different Emergency Departments across NSW this year, I saw an amazing variety of patients, who all taught me something. I thought I would share with you some of the lessons that stuck with me the most.

- Letting your mate practice his 'sleeper hold' on you is not a great idea - especially if he lets you fall on the hard concrete floor when you lose consciousness

- Trying to catch your neighbours' trampoline that is being blown away by gale force winds might be the neighbourly thing to do, but it’s probably going to hurt something – most likely you

- 12 year old boys probably shouldn’t be allowed to play with brand new Swiss army knives

- Knowing all the plots and characters from Disney & Pixar movies is crucial when trying to calm a child down

- If you’re going to do a backflip on your BMX bike, try to make it all the way around rather than lading on your head, and you definitely should have a helmet on

- Surprisingly, handcuffs don’t interfere with ECG traces

- Don’t fix your own TV antenna. Unless you have a safety harness, best to pay someone to do that or just live with fuzzy TV reception.

- Don’t use a chainsaw anywhere near your feet

- Don’t trust your friend behind the wheel of a golf buggy

- Car cup holders are brilliant inventions. Hot drinks should not be held between your legs while driving.

- Skipping a couple days of your daily dialysis could potentially kill you

- The human bowel feels very spongy and weird

- The patients who have the most to complain about are often the nicest

- Sometimes it’s a patient you didn’t even nurse whose story stays with you the longest

- Often, it’s the smallest thing you do for a patient that will make the biggest difference to them