

# A bitter pill to swallow

Are you at risk of overdosing? Hundreds of thousands of Australians end up in hospital every year due to misuse of their prescribed medications. Here's how to mitigate the danger and be smart about your pills.

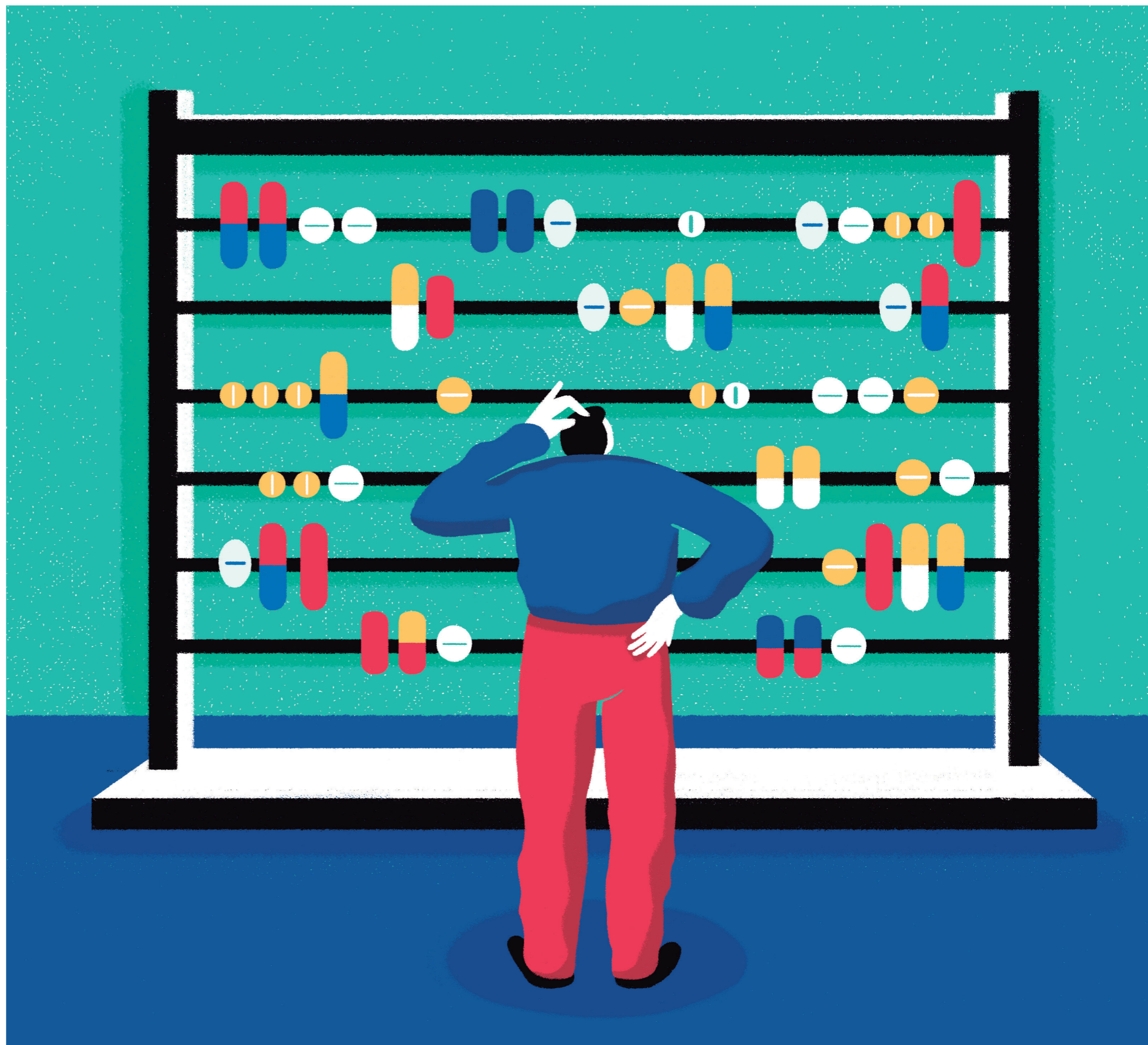
Words **MONIQUE BUTTERWORTH**  
Illustration **BEA CRESPO**



**C**ONSIDER THIS SCENARIO. AFTER A LONG DAY digging, weeding and maintaining the garden, your lower back is killing you. A hot bath doesn't relieve the pain so you poke around the medicine cabinet looking for that packet of pills your doctor prescribed that helped you through an injury six months ago.

There it is! Endone, an opioid pain reliever containing oxycodone (classified as a drug of addiction). You pop two and pour yourself a large glass of shiraz as you make dinner. Then another glass. Next it's time to take your antidepressant. And perhaps a cold and flu tablet (often containing codeine, a 'weak opioid') for your scratchy throat.

In itself, this one-off incident combining opioids, alcohol and antidepressants might prove harmless – but it is just one example of how >



easy it is to misuse medications. According to NPS MedicineWise, an independent organisation devoted to the safe use of medicines in Australia, opioid dispensing increased fourfold from 1990 to 2014 and the prescribing of antidepressants doubled in the period from 2000 to 2016. This suggests the prescribing of both types of drugs together is increasingly common. Many combinations are regarded as safe, the group notes, but of course this depends on them being taken as prescribed.

Renae Beardmore, national vice-president of the Pharmaceutical Society of Australia (PSA), says an estimated 250,000 Australians are admitted to hospital each year because of problems related to their medicines, at a cost of about \$1.4 billion. "In addition, 400,000 Australians present to emergency because of their medicines," she says. PSA estimates that about half of these hospital admissions and emergency visits are preventable, as they are due to issues like medication errors or inappropriate use.

"We know opioids are a problem and there have been unintentional deaths and overdoses," adds Renae. "There are a lot of medicines where mixing with alcohol is contraindicated. And you should never take another person's medicines, either."

Older Australians have a higher incidence of multiple chronic medical conditions, leading them to consume more prescription medication than younger

## "The more prescription medicines people take and then supplement with over-the-counter medicines, the more potential exists for medicine safety issues to occur."

RENAE BEARDMORE  
Pharmaceutical Society of Australia

people. While these medications are intended to treat the patient's health issues, they can increase the risk of an adverse drug reaction, such as an unintentional overdose or medication safety error. This risk multiplies with the number of medications a person takes.

Renae says one danger period for unintentional overdose is when an older patient transitions between a hospital stay and returning home. "Let's say, for example, the patient is on a brand of medicine they know well before they go into hospital. They can be given a different brand, such as a generic brand, when discharged from hospital. What we see is patients not understanding that they're the same drug, so they go home and take both," says Renae. "If the medicine has what we

call a 'narrow safety profile' it is easier for medicine safety issues, including overdose, to occur."

Renae adds that over-the-counter medications – often seen as safer – also need to be respected. "People don't think over-the-counter medicines can cause harm," she says. "In the majority of cases they are safe if taken appropriately, but we need to consider all the medicines a person is taking.

"We are all familiar with the tragic death of actor Heath Ledger [in 2008]. He was unaware of the danger of taking a range of medicines, including those available over-the-counter," she says. "The more prescription medicines people take and then supplement with over-the-counter medicines, the more potential exists for medicine safety issues to occur."

### THE PAIN FACTOR

Carol Bennett, CEO of national advocacy body PainAustralia, says more than a million Australians over 65 are living with chronic pain – a rate that is almost twice as high as the working age population. "The most important issue is ensuring people have good knowledge of pain and how to manage it," says Carol. "And not just with medication but how to manage pain in a holistic way, which is more effective than just using medication.

"Older Australians are more at risk of having a chronic pain condition and of using medications in higher numbers,

### FAST FACTS: PLAYING WITH FIRE

**1,121**

opioid-induced deaths among Australians in 2019.

**873**

of these deaths were considered unintentional.

**632**

deaths were attributed to pharmaceutical opioids.

**547**

deaths were people aged over 45.



Source: National Drug & Alcohol Research Centre, University of NSW.

particularly medications that put them at risk of an accidental overdose," she adds. "Pain medications such as opioids combined with antidepressants or antipsychotics – the risk of overdose goes up dramatically."

John Ryan, CEO of the Penington Institute, which seeks to improve community safety in relation to drugs, agrees. "Not everyone that uses prescription opioids becomes addicted, but there is a risk, particularly with people who have pre-existing mental health issues. They're more vulnerable to developing a dependency on those medications and that's problematic."

So what happens if you think you fall into this category, or you care for someone who does? A recent pilot program called 'Take-home Naloxone' made the life-saving drug, Naloxone, free and available without prescription in three states (NSW, South Australia and Western Australia) for people who are at risk of an opioid overdose. Naloxone can temporarily reverse the dangerous respiratory depressant effects of an opioid overdose, or adverse reaction, if administered by carers, friends or family members while waiting for paramedics to arrive.

Learning how to spot a potential overdose is just as important as having the tools to deal with it. "In an extreme situation, it's someone you simply can't wake up," says John. "They might be snoring



Heath Ledger's mother Sally, father Kim and sister Kate accept his posthumous Oscar in 2009. Heath had died the previous year from an accidental overdose of prescription medications, and Kim now raises awareness of the issue.

unusually. People make the mistake of thinking, 'Oh, they're just sleeping it off,' but unusual snoring is one of the big signs of overdose.

"Call the ambulance," he advises. "Do not hesitate to call 000. People often don't call 000 because they don't want to cause trouble or they don't think it is a serious enough issue. Ideally, you will have Naloxone on hand to administer until paramedics arrive.

"I have spoken to lots of people who didn't ring 000 because they didn't want to escalate the problem and now they live with that regret because someone has passed away from an unintentional overdose. Treat it with the gravity it deserves. It is a life and death situation," says John.

Developments in technology, such as the Real Time Prescription Monitoring (RTPM) system, can help ensure better

patient outcomes. RTPM is a national system designed to monitor the prescribing and dispensing of controlled medicines with the aim of reducing their misuse and limiting 'prescription shopping' or 'doctor shopping'. It provides information to doctors and pharmacists about a patient's history and use of controlled medicines.

RTPM systems, including the pioneering SafeScript in Victoria, are now being rolled out across the country, producing real-time alerts and information for health profes-

sionals. The program is supported by advocacy groups including ScriptWise, which was founded in 2014 by Kim Ledger, father of the late Australian actor Heath.

"Heath's passing really just highlights what is happening everywhere," Kim told the ABC in 2017. "In Heath's case, he mixed drugs for a chest infection with sleeping tablets and that is literally what slowed his system down sufficiently enough to put him to sleep forever.

"Real-time monitoring would have helped [the doctors] know that he had previously got drugs from somewhere else in New York for argument's sake, and would have been able to give the doctors an opportunity to counsel." ●

For confidential help with substance misuse, call the National Alcohol and Other Drugs Hotline on 1800 250 015. For crisis support, call Lifeline on 13 11 14.

## TAKING RESPONSIBILITY

By JOHN RYAN, Penington Institute



### LISTEN TO THE EXPERTS

Pharmaceutical drugs are basically safe and effective as long as they are used as advised. Honest conversations with your doctor are vitally important and they're not the conversations people are having enough of.

### BE HONEST

Doctors rely on their patients telling them the whole truth, warts and all. If you're exceeding recommended alcohol guidelines or consuming cannabis, you need to tell your doctor.

### DON'T STOCKPILE

You can take your expired or unwanted medicines back to any local pharmacy across Australia to dispose of free of charge, thanks to the RUM Project [Return Unwanted Medicines], a government backed, non-profit initiative.