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Pharmaceutical companies, government and doctors need to consult about discontinuation of drugs

In the last few years pharmaceutical companies have announced the discontinuation of useful drugs in several areas of medicine. These have included three antidepressants and another psychiatric drug.

Although the antidepressant drugs are not frequently used, clinicians do not consider them to be obsolete as they continue to have an important role in the management of treatment-resistant depression.

The Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists worked with the Department of Health and Ageing, the Pharmaceutical Benefits Advisory Committee and the companies to try and keep these drugs available in Australia and New Zealand.

Three of the four drugs are still available. Supplies of one drug were temporarily exhausted resulting in some patients experiencing withdrawal symptoms or a recurrence of depression after many years of stability.

"These adverse outcomes show that the pharmaceutical industry, government and the medical profession need to work together to deal with the issue of proposed drug withdrawals to ensure that important drugs are retained for use", said Dr Bill Lyndon of the Department of Psychological Medicine, University of Sydney, and Chair of the College's Committee for Psychotropic Drugs and Other Physical Treatments.

"A company may decide to discontinue the supply of a drug for various reasons. New products coming to the market inevitably means that some older drugs appear to become redundant. Cost, unexpected adverse reactions, manufacturing difficulties and company mergers can also influence drug availability", he said.

Dr Lyndon concludes that the pharmaceutical industry needs to develop guidelines to follow whenever a drug is being considered for withdrawal, including the early notification of health professionals, their colleges, and other relevant organisations.

In the same issue of *Australian Prescriber* Professor Margaret Burgess and Dr Rosemary Lester of the University of Sydney write about meningococcal vaccines, and Dr Sue Hill of Newcastle University writes about hypertension.

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