

4 May 2023



Manager
Clinical Risk Management
Medsafe
medsafeadrquery@health.govt.nz

Dear Manager,

Re: Review of pholcodine-containing medicines

We, the New Zealand Society of Anaesthetists (NZSA), write to submit our feedback that **pholcodine-containing medicines should be withdrawn from New Zealand** due to the associated risk of anaphylactic reaction to neuromuscular blocking agents (NMBAs) used during general anaesthesia.

The newly available information from the ALPHO study¹ and recent actions of the appropriate bodies in Australia, France, and the United Kingdom to withdraw pholcodine-containing medicines confirm the significant and potentially life-threatening harm this medicine poses.

Whilst anaphylaxis may be rarer, the high cost of its occurrence and lack of available measures to minimise the increased risk far outweighs the limited and possibly inconsequential benefit to an individual with an irritating cough.

The NZSA is a professional medical society which represents over 800 Anaesthetists and Specialist Pain Medicine Physicians (SPMP) in New Zealand. Our members include Specialist and Trainee Anaesthetists and SPMPs in public and private practice. Our key roles are advocacy, facilitating and promoting education, and strengthening networks of anaesthetists nationwide.

To reiterate our earlier letters seeking the withdrawal of pholcodine-containing medicines, one of the most challenging aspects of our jobs as Anaesthetists is when presented with an idiosyncratic response that is unexpected, such as anaphylaxis. It is a life-threatening condition that comes at a great cost when it occurs - to the patient, their whānau, the operating team and the healthcare system.

Patients may require days of intensive care treatment following an anaphylaxis event. This is an extremely anxiety-provoking experience for a patient and is often compounded by the required six-week wait that precedes allergy testing. Especially so if the patient must

undergo urgent or repeat surgery during that time when they are not sure what compound caused the anaphylaxis.

With information since your last review now confirming the associated risk of exposure to pholcodine-containing medicines and anaphylactic reaction to neuromuscular blocking agents (NMBAs), we again urge Medsafe to join these international bodies and withdraw pholcodine-containing medicines from New Zealand. Doing so will reduce the life-threatening and life-altering risk it poses for the people of Aotearoa.

Ngā mihi,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Morgan Edwards', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Dr Morgan Edwards
President, New Zealand Society of Anaesthetists

1. ALPHO study: <https://www.medrxiv.org/content/10.1101/2022.12.12.22283353v1.full.pdf> (accessed 1 May 2023)