

Abuse forces curbs on cough mixtures

Controls on sale of cough mixtures

By MARIITA EAGER

THE sale of cough mixtures will be restricted following concern about the increasing abuse of the medicine by Hongkong's teenagers.

New legislation will be introduced before the end of this year to control the over-the-counter sale of about 100 cough medicines and prevent their widespread abuse.

After heroin, cough mixture is the second most widely used drug in the territory and according to police statistics, users under the age of 21 have more than tripled compared with the January-to-March period last year.

Chief Government Pharmacist Mr Li Kwing-yi said an amendment to the Pharmacy and Poisons Ordinance was being drafted and should go before the Legisla-

tive Council within a few months.

The new legislation will upgrade cough mixtures to a more dangerous Schedule One poison category, to limit their over-the-counter supply and ensure stricter control in Hongkong's 200 registered pharmacies and dispensaries.

Under this category, cough mixtures would have to be kept under lock and key on the premises of dispensaries and pharmacies.

Mr Li said when legislation was passed, conditions of sale would be tightened so a buyer of the upgraded cough medicine would have to enter his name and address in a "Poison Register" and state why he wanted the preparation.

The entry would then have to be signed by both the

While the proposed legislation has been welcomed by anti-drug campaigners, it has raised the possibility of cough mixture users switching to more dangerous drugs.

Ms Ivy Chan, head of PS 33, a centre for psychotropic substance abuse, said while the legislation was long overdue, "it is better to do something, than to do nothing at all".

But she admitted "I am worried teenagers will start trying something else, like organic solvents".

Organic solvents such as glue or thinners are sniffed, inhaled and act as depressants, providing the same high as codeine in cough mixture.

Two people died from solvent abuse last year.

Mr Li fended off fears from anti-drug organisations and said the Pharmacy and Poisons Board had to strike a balance.

"Because cough mixtures are so commonly used, we wanted to prevent their abuse without people having to go to the doctor every time they had a cough or tickle in their throat," he said.

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ute MB Phensedyl, said he stopped distribution two months ago.

"We first decided to withdraw the little 100-millilitre bottles available in pharmacies, then we stopped supplying the two-litre bottles to doctors and hospitals.

"Even with the two-litre bottles, you could still make up smaller bottles, so there was no control over the sale of Phensedyl," he said.

Dr Faurant called on other leading pharmaceutical companies to withdraw their products, if they were being abused.

The Government's Chief Pharmacist said generic copies of cough mixtures available on the market would also be upgraded to the more dangerous category.

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purchaser and the pharmacist.

According to Mr Li, under the new legislation the pharmacist would have to be satisfied that the patient really needed the medicine.

Cough mixture containing either codeine or dextromethorphan - including the two most popular brands, Actifed and generic copies of MB Phensedyl - would be affected by this new amendment.

According to the Narcotics Division, MB Phensedyl was the most popular cough medicine being abused and although it has been withdrawn from the market, generic copies of the mixture are still widely available.

Dr Claude Faurant, the manager for Rhone Poulenc Rorer which used to distrib-