



The Palliative Care team

Unlicensed medication

Information for patients regarding medications being used outside their UK licence

The use of medicines beyond their Marketing Authorisation (MA) is widespread, particularly in specialties such as paediatrics and palliative care. Specialist textbooks, such as the Palliative Care Formulary, highlights such use as common place in this field.

Marketing Authorisation means that a medicine has been approved by a regulatory body for use in humans and licensed for specific indications and patient populations and can be marketed for these purposes by the relevant pharmaceutical company.

Off-label describes the use of a medicine beyond the specifications of its MA, such as for an unlicensed indication, or in doses, preparations, patient population or route of administration not covered by the MA.

For example, in Palliative Care, the subcutaneous route of injection is often used but the MA may be for the intravenous route which is more common for other specialties.



What is an unlicensed medicine?

An unlicensed medicine is a drug which does not have MA for medicinal use in humans. Unlicensed medicines include:

- A mixture of two or more medicines in a syringe for administration by continuous infusion
- Medicines with MA in another country, but not the UK, which are imported

The use of unlicensed medicines is widespread in palliative care because the mixing of two or more licensed medicines in a syringe driver is now officially considered to produce an unlicensed preparation as stated above.

Is the use of unlicensed medicines in this way safe?

Yes. A joint statement by the British Pain Society and the Association for Palliative Medicine of Great Britain and Ireland both regard the use of such medicines in palliative care and pain medicine to be in the best interests of the patient and generally represents standard practice.

The MA does not limit what the medicine could be used for (for example, off-label use), and clinical experience may reveal other indications. For these to receive MA, more evidence would need to be gathered and submitted to licencing authorities. Because of how expensive this is, and that the use of this medicine in a certain condition is a very small market, it means that a revised application is not made.

The responsibility for the consequences of prescribing a medicine beyond or without MA lies with the prescriber. They must be competent, operate within the professional codes and ethics of their statutory bodies and the prescribing practices of their employers. The prescriber must be fully informed about the actions and uses of the medicine, be assured of the quality of the product, and in the light of published evidence, balance both the potential good and the potential harm which might result.

The Product Information Leaflet prepared by the manufacturer will only contain information about licensed indications. Thus, it is important that prescribers (or those authorizing treatment on their behalf) provide sufficient information to patients about the expected benefits and potential

Patient Information

risks of using a medicine beyond or without MA (such as undesirable effects and drug interactions).

Useful information

Please speak to the ward nurses and doctors if you have any questions, concerns, or worries at any time.

Help us to get it right

If you have a complaint, concern, comment, or compliment please let us know by speaking to a member of our staff. We learn from your feedback and use the information to improve and develop our services.

If you would like to talk to someone outside the service, contact the Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS) on 0800 028 4203 or email your queries on feedback@uhcw.nhs.uk

The Trust has access to interpreting and translation services. If you need this information in another language or format, please contact the Palliative Care team on 02476 965498 and we will do our best to meet your needs.

The Trust operates a smoke free policy.

To give feedback on this leaflet please email feedback@uhcw.nhs.uk

Document History

Department:	Palliative Care
Contact:	25498
Updated:	August 2022
Review:	August 2025
Version:	2
Reference:	HIC/LFT/2349/19