

Care, Comfort and Hope

Wisconsin Hospitals Community Benefits

Environmental and Occupational Health Hazards

The Wisconsin State Health Plan describes exposure to toxic substances, noise, vibration and other hazardous agents in the environment or the workplace as contributing to disease. Hospitals work diligently to protect the health of their employees by ensuring that they provide a safe, environmentally-friendly workplace. They also share this knowledge with the community by sponsoring activities that encourage the safe disposal of mercury thermometers, medications and “sharps.”

Tomah Memorial partners with police on Rx drug collection

Tomah area residents can safely dispose of unwanted prescription medications thanks to efforts by the Tomah Police Department and Tomah Memorial Hospital.

For the second consecutive year, police and hospital officials teamed up to provide a complimentary medication drop off event. According to Police Lieutenant Mark Nicholson, about 200 people stopped by the Tomah Police Department to hand over 144 lbs. of pills, and 82 lbs. of creams, cough syrup and other meds during an April 22 event.

Officials also used the event to show off a new permanent medication drop off box that is now located at the police department and available during department lobby hours, 8 a.m. to 8:30 p.m. Monday through Friday for unwanted medications.

Tomah Memorial Hospital, Tomah

Coalition targets risks and abuses of unused medication - hosts disposal events

Inevitably, our medicine cabinets are chock full of “leftover” antibiotics, pain medication, sleeping pills and other prescribed and over the counter medicine. And, like many, we forget about those stray pills once our symptoms are over.

But our children might not have. In fact, according to Deputy Cindy Holmes of the Dane County Sheriff’s Office, youth as young as 12 and 13 have taken prescription medication to get high. Nationally, between eight and nine percent of adolescents at any one time have used prescription medication abusively.

That’s one of the reasons the Stoughton Wellness Coalition (SWC) sponsors medication disposal and sharps collection programs. The coalition, which was formed in 2006 through collaborative efforts of Stoughton Hospital, the Stoughton Area School District and the City of Stoughton, promotes a collaborative approach to personal and community wellness through health promotion, educational programming and service to the Stoughton Area Community.

At their September 2008 event, more than 250 pounds of medications were collected - an estimated 139,000 pills—as well as 132 pounds of medical sharps (i.e. diabetic needles).

Last year the group emphasized the widespread, trace-level amount of pharmaceuticals found in the drinking water supplies of millions of Americans and the effect on both humans and the environment. This year, Jane McGuire, public relations and planning manager for Stoughton Hospital, said they hope to call attention to the trend of misuse by teens of prescription and OTC medication.

“In the past, we emphasized the importance of keeping unused medications out of the groundwater,” said McGuire. “However another important reason for this community health endeavor is the rising trend of teens misusing prescription and over-the-counter medications. This is a risky behavior that is growing and something we want to address.”

How is this happening? According to Holmes, youth are becoming desensitized to pharmaceuticals, thanks in part to advertisements that glorify their use.” Historically if you took prescription medication, you didn’t really talk about it,” said Holmes. “It wasn’t turned to as an option as frequently. Now all you hear is, ‘if you feel this, then take this,’ and ‘take this for this and you’ll feel better.’ Those ads are everywhere, especially on the television and in magazines.”

In affect, Holmes said, kids are under the impression that because a medication is prescribed, it’s safe to take. “They think, well it must be safe to take because it’s made in a lab, it’s prescribed by a doctor and it’s available at home.”

According to Nancy Crassweller, AODA prevention coordinator with the Stoughton Area School District, preteens, such

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as 12-year-olds, have quicker, easier access to these medications than street drugs, largely because they don't know how to get access to street drugs.

Crassweller said counselors are also hearing of kids trying to sell their parents or grandparents prescriptions. Some even hold special parties to exchange medications. Called Pharm parties or skittling, the kids bring the prescriptions to the party, throw them in a bowl with others, and the kids take turns grabbing them in handfuls. "The scary thing is that there are so many things for these kids to be worried about, but they don't even realize a lot of times the affects these medications can have on them," said Crassweller.

To that end, Crassweller said the district's approach to AODA prevention includes education of students and staff, firming district policies and procedures in handling such cases, and building of community-wide support for "owning" the problem. "Research shows the best practice is that while schools need to do their part, real change occurs when the strategizing becomes a community-owned issue." That's where the disposal event comes into play.

According to McGuire, the SWC has plans to sponsor a collection/disposal event biannually, if funding is available. She said they will continue to emphasize educating the public about the threat to ground water when these medications are disposed of improperly (i.e., flushed or thrown down the drain) as well as the abuses which can occur with unused medications in relation to risky behaviors in teens and unintentional ingestion by young children and the elderly.

Stoughton Hospital, Stoughton

Out they go! Getting unused prescription drugs out of the house and off the streets



Washington County's Medicine Collection Day Saturday, April 18 collected 1,675 pounds of unneeded and outdated drugs from more than 500 area residents who came to St. Joseph's Hospital for the drive-through drug disposal. St. Joseph's offered its large parking lot and staff resources to planners when the previous site for the collection – the nearby county fairgrounds - became unavailable.

"It was a very successful day," said Paula Muga, BSN, RN, who is with the Washington County Health Department, one of the agencies involved in the event. "People thanked us for holding the event and helping to dispose of the drugs and keep them away from their children and pets."

The 1,675 pounds collected included 1,550 pounds of prescription drugs and 125 pounds of controlled substances – those that have potential for abuse. They filled 26 30-gallon barrels of prescription drugs, two five-gallon barrels of aerosols, and five 14-gallon containers of controlled substances. In 2008, a total of 826 pounds were collected from 370 vehicles.

Medicine Collection Day is a cooperative effort of environmental, government and health organizations throughout Southeastern Wisconsin. In Washington County, Aurora Pharmacy, St. Joseph's Hospital, the Village of Jackson, the Washington County Health Department and Sheriff's Department and the West Bend Sewer Utility organized and staffed the collection. St. Joseph's staff involved in the effort came from infection control, pharmacy, occupational health, plant operations, security, environmental services, employee health and public relations.

Preventing childhood poisonings, reducing substance abuse, and helping to protect Lake Michigan by not flushing drugs into the sewer systems were key goals of the event. The need to get unused medications out of homes took on added significance this year with the recent deaths of several young people in southeastern Wisconsin linked to abuse of prescription drugs.

St. Joseph's Hospital, West Bend

Submit community benefit stories to Mary Kay Grasmick, editor, at mgrasmick@wha.org.



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