



#1530-1200 West 73rd Avenue • Vancouver, BC • V6P 6G5 • T: 604.261.2092 • F: 604.261.2097 • www.bcpharmacy.ca

Pharmacists and the Emergency Contraceptive Pill

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Unintended pregnancy is a serious public health issue with a significant percentage (about 25%) of Canadian pregnancies ending in abortion. Approximately 15,000 abortions are performed each year in British Columbia. It is well established that many unwanted pregnancies occur as a result of unprotected intercourse, inadequate contraceptive measures or a failure of a method of contraception. Such pregnancies are in many cases preventable through the timely use of emergency contraceptive pills (ECP).

While efforts are underway across the country to improve women's awareness of ECP and to improve access to services, the most common ECP service delivery model (going to or calling a physician for a prescription) can present unnecessary barriers to women seeking treatment. Given that the treatment must be used within 72 hours of unprotected intercourse, establishing prescription and dispensing mechanisms that are accessible and convenient to women is critical to their ability to use the therapy effectively.

In 1999, the British Columbia Pharmacy Association (BCPhA) and the College of Pharmacists of British Columbia (CPBC), along with other supporting groups, undertook ongoing discussions with the College of Physicians and Surgeons of BC and the Government of BC with the goal of enabling either a Collaborative Agreement or Prescriptive Authority model of ECP provision in BC pharmacies.

On October 25, 2000 the Government of British Columbia made changes to provincial regulations to enable pharmacists to provide ECP to women directly under a limited prescriptive authority. The regulations now designate pharmacists as "practitioners" for provision of ECP, and they designate a drug schedule for pharmacist prescribing that contains the hormones for emergency contraception. The ECP program began in BC pharmacies on December 1, 2000.

Pharmacists wishing to become registered with the CPBC as a certified provider of ECP must first complete a comprehensive ___day training program administered by the BCPhA.

Research data collected by the Faculty of Pharmaceutical Sciences at the University of British Columbia indicates there are on average approximately 140 pharmacist generated prescriptions for ECP in the province of BC each week. It is also estimated that as a result of these ECP prescriptions about 400 abortions are prevented in the province each year.

In December 2001, the Quebec provincial government approved a program enabling Quebec pharmacists to prescribe ECP. The province of Ontario has conducted a pilot project to determine the feasibility of pharmacist ECP prescribing and

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position statement



British Columbia
Pharmacy Association

other provinces such as Alberta and Manitoba are also considering pursuing regulatory changes to allow pharmacist prescribing of ECP.

Paladin Laboratories Inc. the manufacturer of Plan B® the most widely prescribed ECP product in Canada, made a submission in 2002 to Health Canada to change the status of Plan B® from prescription to non-prescription. While supported by a number of influential national organizations including the Canadian Pharmacists Association (CPhA), the Paladin Laboratories submission to Health Canada was opposed by a number of provincial pharmacy organizations including the BCPhA.

The opposing parties feel strongly that the current ECP programs incorporating pharmacist prescribing of ECP are proven to be effective and safely and effectively increased women's access to ECP. The pharmacists' direct participation in the prescribing and sale of ECP ensures that the medication is used appropriately. The interaction with the patient also allows pharmacists the opportunity to provide women with essential information on sexual health and family planning issues.

In July 2002, Health Canada denied approval of the Paladin Laboratories submission and gave the company a period of 90 days to satisfy a number of Health Canada concerns before the application is brought forward for further review.

BCPhA Position

The BCPhA opposes any schedule changes to ECP products in Canada.

