Paracetamol poisoning: can it be prevented?

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PARACETAMOL POISONING: CAN IT BE PREVENTED?

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INTRODUCTION
Paracetamol first became available in the United Kingdom as an over-the-counter medicine in 1963 and is currently used by approximately 30 million people annually in the UK.1 It is available for use in a range of forms as powders, capsules and tablets.

PARACETAMOL IS SAFE IN THERAPEUTIC USE
Whilst paracetamol can be given in therapeutic dose to just about every patient, aspirin and ibuprofen are unsuitable for people predisposed to gastric ulcers and asthma.2-4 There is considerable controversy about whether a recent study predicts an increase in asthma after use of paracetamol: this study has a number of limitations including small odds ratios, a biologically implausible hypothesis and failure to exclude confounding factors such as non-steroidal drug use.5, 6

HOW LARGE IS THE PROBLEM OF PARACETAMOL OVERDOSE IN THE UK?
Each year, approximately 30,000-40,000 cases of paracetamol overdose present to Accident and Emergency departments across England and Wales, and it accounts for up to 48% of hospital admissions for self-poisoning.7 The majority of these people suffer no long-term ill-effects, and only approximately 10% require treatment with its antidote.8

In the early 1990s, 200–300 deaths occurred every year from paracetamol poisoning in the UK.9 This is less than 1% of the total number of reported overdoses in the UK each year, a fraction of the reported deaths for other commonly used prescribed drugs such as tricyclic antidepressants.10

HOW HAS PARACETAMOL GAINED A REPUTATION FOR BEING SO DANGEROUS?
The hope that ‘prevention is better than cure’ would seem particularly cogent in paracetamol overdosage, especially when taking into account the costs, both economic (to the NHS) and emotional (to the patient and their family) of the treatment.

HOW DANGEROUS ARE OVERDOSES OF OTHER ANALGESICS?
A serious overdose of aspirin (well over 300 mg/kg body weight), resulting in a plasma concentration of over 700 mg/L, is fatal in 5% of cases.11 Overdose with non-steroidal drugs usually causes little more than gastrointestinal upset. However, large ingestions can cause seizures, hypotension, coma, metabolic acidosis and renal failure; seizures occur in 30% of cases of mafenamic acid overdoses.12

HOW MUCH DO PARACETAMOL OVERDOSES COST THE NHS EACH YEAR?
A blood test to establish the level of paracetamol in the blood costs approximately £1 per sample in a standard clinical chemistry laboratory. If an antidote is necessary, N-acetylcysteine costs approximately £20 per patient (more if infusions of more than 20 hours are used). An overnight stay in hospital costs approximately £250. Therefore, treatment of 30,000 overdoses of whom 10% need antidotal treatment,4 and perhaps half of whom also require admission annually, comes to a substantial cost. In addition, about £100,000 is spent on liver transplantation for paracetamol-induced liver failure each year, with ongoing costs of immunosuppression, medical review and possible re-transplantation.32

POTENTIAL METHODS OF PREVENTING PARACETAMOL OVERDOSE
The adage that ‘prevention is better than cure’ would seem particularly cogent in paracetamol overdosage, especially when taking into account the costs, both economic (to the NHS) and emotional (to the patient and their family) of the treatment.

Addition of methionine to every paracetamol tablet
Methionine is an essential amino acid present in dietary meat (approximately 2 g per day) and it has been co-formulated with some paracetamol tablets in the UK (formerly Pameton, with 300 mg methionine in each tablet, SmithKline Beecham and currently Paradoxe, with 100 mg methionine in each tablet, Penn Pharmaceuticals). The advantage of such a combination tablet is that methionine is a substrate for glutathione synthesis. Therefore, in the event of a paracetamol overdose, it acts as an antidote and the levels of glutathione would be expected to be high enough to prevent significant tissue damage from occurring.13 However, potential safety issues concerning methionine supplementation have been identified (Table 1).14 A recent study shows that moderate methionine loading at the amount present in combination paracetamol/methionine tablets may not in fact raise homocysteine levels significantly, for cardiovascular problems to occur.24 At high doses, methionine causes nausea, headache, vomiting, drowsiness, and irritability.14
Potential risks of methionine.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Risk Group</th>
<th>Reason</th>
<th>Reference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pregnant women</td>
<td>Methionine is metabolised to homocysteine and raised plasma homocysteine is associated with birth defects, pre-eclampsia, spontaneous abortion and placental abruption.</td>
<td>15, 16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Schizophrenic patients</td>
<td>Schizophrenic patients given 10–20 g methionine daily developed functional psychoses.</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patients with pre-existing cancer</td>
<td>Restriction of methionine intake blocks division and metastasis of tumour cells.</td>
<td>18, 19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ischaemic heart disease (IHD), peripheral vascular disease (PVD), stroke</td>
<td>Methionine is metabolised to homocysteine – raised homocysteine levels are associated with IHD, PVD and stroke.</td>
<td>20–22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patients with chronic liver disease</td>
<td>The liver has an impaired ability to metabolise methionine.</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

To be effective in prevention of paracetamol overdoses, the combination tablet would have to be the only preparation of paracetamol sold or prescribed. As its only benefit is in the overdose situation, the question arises of whether it is ethical to add a chemical, which would only be advantageous to a minority (who take paracetamol overdoses), to a substance that is used by millions of people. This becomes a much more difficult issue when the safety of regular methionine intake is unproven. In addition methionine has a fishy taste, making the combination tablet unpalatable to many and the combination product would be eight times more expensive than just paracetamol alone.

Taking the above factors into account, it would seem that, whilst in theory the combination tablet would be a good idea in preventing death and hepatotoxicity from overdose, in practice its current drawbacks may outweigh its benefits.

**Warnings on packs of paracetamol**

The Medicines Control Agency has asked that the following warning be put on paracetamol packaging, but its rationale is to aid compliance with the recommended dosage and to prevent accidental overdose.

Such warnings are unlikely to have much of an impact in preventing overdose, as the vast majority of paracetamol overdose cases are intentional or impulsive, rather than accidental. However, they are still worth including.

**Reducing paracetamol pack size**

At the moment the packet sizes of paracetamol that one should be able to obtain in the UK are:

- 16–24 from supermarkets, corner shops;
- 24–36 from a pharmacy;
- Up to 100 from a pharmacy for a chronic condition;
- >100 from a pharmacy by prescription.

Larger paracetamol overdoses have been related to larger package sizes, so it would seem sensible to limit package sizes available. This approach is clearly aimed at people who take an overdose on impulse, and if only small packets of paracetamol were available at the time, the theory is that the overdose would not be so severe. However, when we posed as patients with knee pain, problems of compliance with such restrictions were demonstrated in shops in the London area (Table 2). It is also possible to buy large quantities from dispensers which do not limit the amount sold, and these are installed in such places as the Royal College of Physicians and certain conference centres, such as that in Edinburgh!

Even if there were compliance with the restricted sales of paracetamol, individuals seriously intending to commit suicide would not be deterred, as they would simply buy more packets from multiple sources. It is too early to firmly establish whether the reduction in packaging of paracetamol has had any impact on poisoning with this drug but early studies are not surprisingly conflicting.

**Removal of paracetamol from the market**

Is it ethical to ban a drug of therapeutic benefit to many? Paracetamol was marketed in 1968 after nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory agents that have side-effects

### Table 1

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Potential risks of methionine.</th>
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<td><strong>Risk Group</strong></td>
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### Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sources in London</th>
<th>Number of paracetamol tablets sold together to one of the authors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Supermarket</td>
<td>48; 48; 64; 48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pharmacy</td>
<td>48; 48; 48; 48; 64; 48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corner shop/Newsagents</td>
<td>48; 48; 64; 48</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Regulations on pack size and supply came into effect from September 1998*
in therapeutic doses and significant toxicity in overdose, as discussed above.

Making paracetamol a prescription-only medicine
Paracetamol could be made available only on prescription, therefore preventing people from obtaining large amounts of it when it is not needed. However, this would greatly increase the workload of general practitioners by at least 30 million scripts per year. Alternatively it could be made obtainable from pharmacists only, but it would be very difficult for the pharmacist to determine whether an individual wanted the paracetamol for a genuine complaint or intended self-harm, and from our data (Table 2) this would not necessarily limit the amount supplied.

Reducing publicity about the drug
In Australia, a country with approximately half the population of the UK, paracetamol is just as readily available, but the overdose rate and number of severe liver problems resulting from the drug are much lower. Reasons for this might include less publicity about the drug in overdose, or earlier presentation of overdoses. Certainly, evidence to date points to the difference being culturally determined in some way. Perhaps less publicity about fatal overdoses and any toxic side-effects may make paracetamol appear to be a drug less suitable for overdoses. There is certainly evidence that depicting overdoses on television leads to increased overdose incidence with that substance afterwards.

Addition of an emetic or bittering agent
An emetic when added to paracetamol in small amounts would not have much effect, but if many tablets were taken the individual would vomit. The amount that would need to be put into tablets would have to be sufficient to make the patient vomit before sufficient paracetamol had been absorbed to cause damage. It might conceivably also help prevent accidental overdose as it would give a warning signal to alert the patient of a potential problem at an early stage when antidotal therapy is still effective. Alternatively a bittering agent such as Bitrex would cause the tablet to taste unpleasant, therefore deterring people from taking large amounts.

Neither of these measures would be expected to be widely welcomed by the pharmaceutical industry, which might reasonably fear falling sales of their product. Both techniques have their advantages, but once again the result is contradictory about effectiveness of such a policy. The result is that paracetamol remains widely available in the UK, in large quantities. Whilst a number of options to reduce paracetamol overdose deaths have been considered, few are practical. Reduced publicity and addition of a substance to reduce toxicity are potential ways forward.

CONCLUSIONS
Paracetamol is taken by approximately 30 million people each year in the UK and less than 1% of those taking the drug attend hospital with paracetamol overdose, the vast majority of those having no sequelae. Sadly, however, up to 300 patients die every year after paracetamol overdose with acute liver failure, usually those presenting late. The vast majority of people who take overdoses do so on purpose, either as a suicide attempt or a ‘cry for help’.

If paracetamol availability were to be limited, other analgesics, which have potential for toxicity in therapeutic dose and overdose, would be used. Restriction of pack size is not being enforced from our data and evidence to date is contradictory about effectiveness of such a policy. The result is that paracetamol remains widely available in the UK, in large quantities. Whilst a number of options to reduce paracetamol overdose deaths have been considered, few are practical. Reduced publicity and addition of a substance to reduce toxicity are potential ways forward.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST
A.L. Jones has acted as adviser to Oxford Pharmaceuticals, SmithKline Beecham, Cumberland Pharmaceuticals and Astra-Zeneca Novartis. All other authors have no conflict of interest to declare. The NPIS receives support for educational activity from Oxford Pharmaceuticals Ltd.

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