

Media release

Monday 27 April 2020

Australia's real COVID-19 risk is medicines, not ventilators

Results of a Society of Hospital Pharmacists of Australia (SHPA) survey shows hospitals' orders for medicines necessary to support ventilated beds are not being met, and raise concerns the planned return of elective surgeries will add further pressure to medicines supply, refuting misconceptions that hospitals are 'stockpiling' medicines during COVID-19.

In releasing findings from its first weekly COVID-19 Hospital Pharmacy Capacity Snapshot today, SHPA voiced support for the ongoing collaborative effort led by the Therapeutic Goods Administration (TGA) to safeguard the country's supply of essential medicines, critical to managing a surge in COVID-19 inpatient cases if it eventuates.

SHPA Chief Executive Kristin Michaels says access to key medicines, including propofol and cisatracurium, have emerged as factors likely to reduce Australia's capacity to treat a surge of COVID-19 patients.

'Propofol is a key medicine used in the intubation of patients who require ventilation. In our snapshot on Friday 17 April hospital respondents only had enough propofol to treat patients in less than half the hospital beds they have been asked to set up.

'Just as Australia was asked to come together and increase ventilated intensive care capacity, SHPA has been working with partners to ensure we have enough medicines to provide care for Australians receiving care in these hospital beds.

'Hospitals have reported not having their orders filled for several weeks, with 80% of orders only supplied in part, regardless of hospital size, location or patient cohort, highlighting a supply chain in distress.'

Ms Michaels says the figures question the ability of Australia's healthcare system to treat a potential COVID-19 surge and the timing of a return to elective surgeries.

'Stocks of these drugs are a tightly guarded secret nationwide and hospitals are poorly informed as to what stock they should expect to receive in coming weeks and months.

'Hospitals are implementing the national response to COVID-19 – including doubling their intensive care beds in many cases, which requires an increase in medicines to be operationalised – only to have commercial wholesalers and manufacturers unable to provide access to key medicines.'

'We appreciate medicine wholesalers may have the best intentions, but they are not clinicians and do not have access to the information about pandemic scenarios and hospital service planning and delivery that must guide medicine orders.'

Ms Michaels says Australia's hospital pharmacists are in lockstep with their colleagues to ensure the country is prepared for any COVID-19 scenario.

'The rapid preparations we are seeing across the country to ensure the very best care for Australians is not "stockpiling", it is the prudent following of national COVID-19 response plans, ensuring every hospital has enough medicines to operate ventilated beds should demand increase.

'We need to ensure that, during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, every Australian can be assured of access to a fully resourced hospital bed; this means not only the assistance of a ventilator, if they need one, but the full suite of medicines required to treat a COVID-19 patient.'

– ends –

For more information contact:

Nick Sharp-Paul, Head of Strategy and Communication
nsharp-paul@shpa.org.au | 0411 098 838

About SHPA

The Society of Hospital Pharmacists of Australia (SHPA) is the national, professional, for-purpose organisation for leading pharmacists and pharmacy technicians working across Australia's health system, advocating for their pivotal role improving the safety and quality of medicines use. Embedded in multidisciplinary medical teams and equipped with exceptional medicines management expertise, SHPA members are progressive advocates for clinical excellence, committed to evidence-based practice and passionate about patient care.

shpa.org.au |   