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## DOCTORS DEMAND ACTION ON DEADLY DRUG LOOPHOLES

Doctors are calling on the Queensland Government to introduce an effective prescription monitoring system to stop the abuse of opioid drugs and save dozens of lives each year.

There has been a dramatic surge in accidental opioid overdoses in Queensland in recent years – from 32 deaths among 15-54 year-olds in 2003 to 114 deaths in the same age group in 2013.<sup>1</sup>

AMA Queensland says the rise of ‘doctor-shopping’ by drug-addicted patients is partly to blame and is now calling for the State Government introduce a ‘real-time’ prescription monitoring system to stamp out the problem.

AMA Queensland President Dr Bill Boyd said the introduction of an effective monitoring system in Tasmania in 2008 had slashed the number of opioid overdoses in that state.

“The number of opioid overdoses in Queensland is increasing at an alarming rate,” Dr Boyd said.

“This issue requires urgent action. Patients’ lives are at stake.

“We know from the Tasmanian example what needs to be done and it is time for the Queensland Government to act.”

Opioids such as fentanyl and oxycodone were traditionally used as strong pain-killing drugs for cancer patients but their use has become more widespread in recent years.

AMA Queensland began investigating the need for improved prescription monitoring after a 2015 inquest into the death of Toowoomba nurse Katie Lee Howman.

Ms Howman died after taking an accidental overdose of fentanyl she obtained at Toowoomba Hospital, but the inquest heard she had visited 20 different doctors and 15 pharmacies in the 13 months before her death, amassing 71 prescriptions for pain medication.

Her husband, Heath Howman, said action was needed to improve prescription monitoring and restrict the dispensing of high-addictive and potentially deadly drugs.

“None of Katie’s friends or family knew how bad her situation really was,” Mr Howman said.

“If something like this had been in place a doctor could have helped her before things became critical.”

At present, pharmacists manually upload records of drug prescriptions to Queensland Health’s Monitoring of Drugs Dependence System (MODDS) database once a month.

Health Minister Cameron Dick last month announced that records would be updated weekly, while the Federal Government announced it would invest \$16m in developing a national prescription alert system.

While welcoming both announcements, AMA Queensland wants further prompt action because it believes it will take several years to develop the national solution being pursued by Canberra.

It is calling on the State Government to conduct a study of the Tasmanian model ahead of developing its own software solution for Queensland.

Such a system should enable pharmacists to scan prescriptions in real-time into the MODDS database and allow doctors to access the information from their desktop computers.

AMA Queensland believes the new state-based system should be in place by 2020 at the latest and could be integrated into a national system at a later date.

“Doctors know our systems are out-dated and are failing patients, sometimes with deadly consequences” Dr Boyd said.

“This issue needs to be addressed by Queensland Health – not in a few years’ time but now.”

**AMA Queensland’s position statement on real-time prescription monitoring can be viewed at: [www.amaq.com.au/page/Advocacy/Position\\_Statements/](http://www.amaq.com.au/page/Advocacy/Position_Statements/)**

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<sup>i</sup> National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre 2017 NIDIP Bulletin, Accidental drug-induced deaths due to opioids in Australia 2013