



## Over-the-counter sales of “the morning-after pill”

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Some months ago the Therapeutic Goods Administration decreed that Postinor-2, “the morning-after pill” should be available over-the-counter from Australian pharmacists i.e. without a doctor’s prescription.

This was a mistake and no pharmacist should be coerced into selling the morning-after pill against his or her better judgement.

Sometimes the morning-after pill doesn’t work (e.g. because it is known not to be 100% effective or because the woman using it is not in fact fertile at that time); sometimes it works as a contraceptive (by preventing ovulation or fertilization); sometimes it works by causing a ‘chemical’ abortion (by preventing the implantation of a newly-conceived human embryo). Women who use the drug may not know what has actually occurred. But they should be told the truth about each of these possibilities and not be misled by the use of such terms as “the emergency contraceptive pill”.

There are serious reasons why no pharmacist should feel pressured or be compelled to sell the morning-after pill.

**1. Risks:** There are physical risks associated with this drug: it may interact with other drugs and it is associated with a slightly increased risk of ectopic pregnancy. There are also psychological risks to underage girls and to women who use the morning-after pill regularly. Where sexual assault is suspected, a pharmacist should try to ensure that the woman reports the matter to the police and that she seeks the proper medical care. As the Chair of the Australian Medical Association’s Ethics Committee says, making the morning-after pill available over the counter trivializes women’s health.

**2. Professional responsibilities:** The code of conduct of the Pharmaceutical Society of Australia obliges pharmacists to make sure that all reasonable care is taken when dispensing medicines. This includes not only ensuring that their patients are properly informed about how to use drugs which they dispense to them but also respecting their privacy and preserving the confidentiality of the professional relationship. All this makes it extremely difficult for a pharmacist (particularly in a busy pharmacy) to fulfil his or her duty of care to women who want to buy the morning-after pill over the counter.

**3. Professional ethics:** A proper code of ethics for any profession will point out that a member of that profession should never be required to participate in an activity that in conscience the person considers to be wrong. The Position Statement of the Pharmaceutical Society of Australia, entitled “Ethical issues in declining to supply”, does just this when it says: ‘PSA recognizes and respects the right of individuals, including health professionals, to hold a moral belief on particular issues. It further recognizes that at times these moral beliefs may impact on the roles undertaken by those health professionals.’

**4. The law and conscientious objection:** A pharmacy owner or employee is not required by law to dispense any or all non-PBS prescription medicines, a fact also pointed out in the Position Statement of the Pharmaceutical Society of Australia. Employed pharmacists who might be expected to dispense the morning-after pill should express their conscientious objection clearly to their employer. Employers should respect those beliefs and not pressure employees to act contrary to their beliefs on this matter.

People should be encouraged and enabled to take responsibility for their sexual activity and not to engage in activities which might lead them to seek ‘over-the-counter’ a medicine which may act as an abortifacient. The morning-after pill does nothing to address (and may actually exacerbate) high rates of underage sex, sexually-transmitted disease and sex outside marriage. Pharmacists should not be expected to be complicit in social irresponsibility.

No-one, and especially no member of the healing professions such as pharmacy, can ethically be expected or required to cooperate in an activity which might bring about a very early abortion. No pharmacist should ever formally cooperate in ‘chemical’ abortion. The right of pharmacists to refuse to participate in such activity is rightly respected in both law and professional practice.