

# Advice for prescribers during the COVID-19 pandemic

7 April 2020 (Updated 11 May 2020)

Public health emergency orders have been issued to facilitate the prescribing and supply of prescription medicines during the COVID-19 pandemic.

## **PHEO #3 - Public health emergency order ([Gazette No. S 158 Thursday 26 March 2020](#)) to prescribe Schedule 8 medicines without a Schedule 8 permit for non drug-dependent patients is in place until midnight 27 September 2020, unless earlier revoked**

A public health emergency order has been issued to enable medical practitioners and nurse practitioners to prescribe Schedule 8 medicines for more than 8 weeks without a Schedule 8 permit to non-drug dependent patients, as long as the medical practitioners and nurse practitioners take all reasonable steps to check the patient's SafeScript profile. This is effective until midnight 27 September 2020.

The usual Schedule 8 permit requirements and exemptions still apply for patients who are drug dependent. Medical practitioners and nurse practitioners are required to obtain a Schedule 8 permit before prescribing any Schedule 8 medicines for patients who are drug dependent unless the patient is being treated in hospital, in prison or in an aged care facility.

This public health emergency order also allows medical practitioners and nurse practitioners (who do not hold current permits and who are not paediatricians or psychiatrists) to prescribe a limited quantity (not more than 30-days' treatment) of Special Schedule 8 medicines (including dexamphetamine, lisdexamfetamine and methylphenidate) without first obtaining a permit.

For full details of Schedule 8 permit requirements, including exceptions relating to the PHEO #3 and specialist practitioners, please refer to the summary document at

<https://www2.health.vic.gov.au/about/publications/policiesandguidelines/schedule-8-treatment-permits-requirements-vic>

Medicines and Poisons Regulation will not be processing or issuing Schedule 8 permit applications for patients who are not drug-dependent during this period.

### **What is a drug-dependent person?**

While the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition (DSM-V)* and the *International Classification of Diseases 10<sup>th</sup> Revision (ICD-10)* lists criteria to assist medical practitioners to diagnose the condition, the Drugs Poisons and Controlled Substances Act 1981 does not define the term 'drug-dependent person'. It refers instead to when a practitioner has **reason to believe** a patient is a drug-dependent person.

The following list contains examples of circumstances that might (or should) represent a reason to believe a patient is a drug-dependent person, especially when multiple circumstances apply:

- Admitted current misuse or abuse of pharmaceutical medicines and/or illicit drugs
- Prescription-shopping and/or obtaining prescription medicines from illicit sources
- Physical signs of intravenous drug use
- Forging prescriptions or obtaining drugs of dependence by false representation
- Multiple unsanctioned dose escalations of prescribed medicines
- Is being treated with opioid-replacement therapy for opioid-dependence

## SafeScript

SafeScript is Victoria's real-time prescription monitoring database which allows medical practitioners, nurse practitioners and pharmacists to readily view recent records of monitored medicines dispensed for patients so that they may make better informed, safer decisions around whether to prescribe or supply a monitored medicine.

To register for SafeScript, please click [here](#). For SafeScript training including livestreams, webinars and online modules, please click [here](#).

Medical practitioners, nurse practitioners and pharmacists will need to take all reasonable steps to check SafeScript before prescribing or supplying any monitored medications for a patient from 1 April 2020.

For a list of medications monitored in SafeScript, please click [here](#).

## **PHEO #4 - Public health emergency order ([Gazette No. S 229 Monday 11 May 2020](#)) for supply on a digital image of an original paper prescription transmitted by the prescriber until midnight 6 October 2020, unless earlier revoked**

A pharmacist can supply a Schedule 4 medicine (excluding drugs of dependence) on a digital image of an original paper prescription transmitted by the prescriber. The digital image of the paper prescription must be an unaltered photo image or unaltered facsimile image of an original prescription. Forms of transmission of the digital image from the prescriber to the pharmacist may include email, SMS, facsimile or other means of electronic transmission.

The digital image of the original prescription must be transmitted directly from the prescriber (or an employee acting in accordance with the instruction of the practitioner) but not via the patient or any other intermediary.

The prescriber must: (a) sign the original paper copy of the prescription; (b) retain the original prescription in a safe and secure way for 2 years; (c) record in patient notes that a digital image of the original paper prescription was transmitted under this public health emergency order (PHEO #4); (c) produce the original paper prescription if requested by an authorised officer.

***Amendment 11 May 2020 – The original prescription must include the handwritten signature of the prescriber except where it is not possible for the prescription to include the handwritten signature due to operation of telehealth, the prescriber may include a digital image of their handwritten signature or give access to the digital image of their handwritten signature to an employee, where the employee acts in accordance with the instruction of the prescriber to apply the digital image of the prescriber's signature to the original prescription.***

**DO** ask the patient which pharmacy they would like the digital image of the original prescription to be transmitted to.

**DO** ask the pharmacy how they would like to receive the digital image of the original prescription, ie fax, email, SMS, or alternative electronic transmission.

**DO NOT** send the original paper prescription to the pharmacy.

**DO NOT** send the digital image of the original paper prescription to the patient.

Schedule 4 drugs of dependence and Schedule 8 medicines may NOT be prescribed and supplied under this public health emergency order. Drugs of dependence include all opioids, benzodiazepines and anabolic steroids.

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