

Developing technician-focused Controlled Drug management

By Judith Telford



MICHAEL DONNE/SPL

Morphine injection being used in surgery: pharmacy technicians now have a key role in ensuring that Controlled Drugs are available in the right place at the right time

At Hexham General Hospital, all aspects of Controlled Drug handling have traditionally been the remit of pharmacists. This article looks at how and why a scheme was implemented to increase the involvement of technicians and pharmacy assistants in this area of practice

Handling Controlled Drugs (CDs) has traditionally been a role for pharmacists at the Hexham General Hospital, Northumberland, a 98-bed district general hospital, which has recently been rebuilt through a private finance initiative. Pharmacists alone were responsible for keeping the records about the receipt and supply of CDs, checking their stock levels and dispensing them. There seemed, however, to be several reasons why this arrangement should change.

First, carrying sole responsibility for dealing with CDs took up a significant amount of pharmacists' time that could potentially be better spent carrying out clinical activities on wards. Secondly, handling CDs seemed to be a natural extension of technician involve-

ment in other areas of managing the technical aspects of the supply of drugs, and would add interest and job satisfaction to technicians' work. Thirdly, technicians and dispensing assistants at other hospitals in the Northumbria Healthcare Trust were already involved in handling CDs and it was thought that it was appropriate for policies on CDs throughout the trust to be streamlined.

There were also other aspects of CD policy where improvements could be made. In particular, ward staff were responsible for ordering their own stock CDs on an ad hoc, on demand basis. This meant that orders could be received at any time of the day, including periods when the dispensary was busy and pharmacists were engaged in other tasks. Either the dispensary work flow had to be disrupted to dispense the items, causing inconvenience to pharmacists and other pharmacy staff, or there was a significant time lapse before the CDs could be dispensed and delivered to the ward, causing inconvenience to ward staff. In addition, there was no pharmacy staff involvement in checking for surplus and expired stock on wards.

It was therefore decided to implement a scheme whereby technicians and dispensing

assistants took on much of the day-to-day management of CDs supply, working in accordance with newly-created standard operating procedures (SOPs). As dispensary and ward services manager, I was responsible for overseeing this project, which was carried out in the following stages:

- Assessing the regulatory issues
- Developing various SOPs (by July 2003)
- Putting in place appropriate training for technicians
- Having technicians routinely supply CDs to wards, including making the appropriate register entries (by September 2003)
- Having technicians routinely dispense CDs, including making the appropriate register entries (by September 2003)
- Having technicians sign for CDs received into the pharmacy department from manufacturers and wholesalers and update the register accordingly (by September 2003)
- Having dispensing assistants perform a ward top-up of CDs as part of their regular ward top-up duties (by September 2003).

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- Having technicians routinely check for and remove excess and expired stock from wards
- Analysing the degree to which the new policy was being implemented by assessing the number of issues of CDs per month by pharmacists and technicians (April to December 2003)
- Surveying ward staff satisfaction levels
- Auditing CD prescriptions for their compliance with legal requirements (November 2003, and then yearly)

Further information on some of these stages is set out below.

Regulatory issues

After examining the various regulatory issues associated with signing for CDs, it was decided to adopt the “designated person” system that has been in use at the pharmacy departments at the North Tyneside and Wansbeck General hospitals. This enables suitably-trained technicians to manage day-to-day aspects of CD supply.

Developing SOPs

I developed a total of 11 SOPs. The topics covered by these are set out in Panel 1.

Once written, I needed to have the SOPs approved by senior pharmacists. It was also necessary to ensure that all staff were aware of the new working methods and standards and that the new SOPs were implemented. As part of this process, I organised various staff training programmes.

Training

Technician training included completing a 50-item log sheet to assess their competency to dispense CDs. They were also given further training by pharmacists in other aspects of CD handling, such as completing CD registers, carrying out stock checks and signing for CD deliveries.

Dispensing assistants underwent a comprehensive training programme that included practical work, direct observation and oral questioning by a qualified assessor. On completion, they were deemed competent to undertake ward top-ups of CDs. Much of this training was provided off-site by pharmacy staff at another hospital at the trust (Wansbeck General Hospital) where dispensing assistants already took on this role.

Before the new scheme was set up, there was no formal training for portering staff on how to transport CDs to wards. With the involvement of the head porter, I set up a training programme. This required portering staff to receive practical instruction and undertake background reading, as well as being observed and questioned orally by a qualified assessor.



Judith Telford: winner of the supply chain category of the 2004 AAH Hospital Pharmacy Technician of the Year Award

It was also important to keep ward staff well-informed about developments in the service. This was done by means of memos and meetings with senior nursing staff.

Challenges

Various challenges arose in connection with the project, which needed to be addressed in order for the new working practices to be implemented as smoothly as possible. For example, while many technicians and dispensing assistants looked forward to taking on their new roles, others felt more negatively about them, perceiving them as extra responsibility without any reward. One way of countering this was to ensure that all staff were kept fully informed throughout all stages of the project and provided with ample opportunity to give feedback.

It was also important for the scheme to be implemented, where possible, at a pace that was right for individual staff members. This was not easy, because there was a tendency for pharmacists to off-load CD-related work onto technicians and dispensing assistants too quickly. Discussing issues with pharmacists and reminding them of the potential long-term gains once the new working practices were in place helped here. In addition, a significant number of technicians and dispensing assistants had been in post for less than six months. In general, these staff members needed more training and encouragement before they could take on the new roles than did more established staff.

The project coincided with other changes at Hexham General Hospital. These included the rebuilding of the hospital itself and the introduction of other changes to the delivery of pharmacy services, such as bringing in one-stop dispensing and technician checking and the setting up of an overlabelling unit. In some ways, this made implementing the new scheme easier, because staff were used to dealing with change. In other ways, however, it made things more difficult. For example, even though wards and departments took their existing CD stock with them, the move to the new hospital site during July and August 2003 meant that more CDs needed to be issued (mainly to theatres) than usually occurred during these traditionally “quieter” months when many pharmacy staff took their annual leave.

Selling the “porter training programme” to the head porter also proved to be a challenge. He initially saw the new ways of working as a threat, and the training programme as an indication that his staff were not trusted. Diplomacy in ensuring him that this was not the case, together with canvassing the opinions of the porters themselves,

Panel 1: Standard operating procedures developed for Hexham General Hospital in connection with the new Controlled Drug (CD) handling practices

- Issuing stock CDs to wards and departments
- Receiving CDs from wholesalers or manufacturers
- Issuing CDs on prescriptions
- Checking CD stock levels on wards and departments
- Removing unwanted CDs from wards and departments
- Receiving CDs from ward and departments stocks
- Destroying patients-own CDs and out of date pharmacy or ward and department stock that is not in Schedule two of the Misuse of Drugs Regulations 2001
- Transferring CD ward records to a new register
- Dealing with expired CDs from pharmacy stock or ward and department stock
- Transporting CDs from the pharmacy department to wards and departments at Hexham General Hospital
- Auditing the extent to which prescriptions for CDs received by pharmacy staff comply with the relevant legal requirements

Table 1: Analysis of the number of issues of Controlled Drugs (CDs) made by pharmacists and by technicians at Hexham General Hospital between April and December 2003

Month	Percentage of CD issues made by pharmacists	Percentage of CD issues made by technicians	Total number of CD issues
April	86	14	91
May	35	65	101
June	14	86	66
July	26	74	84
August	31	69	88
September	24	76	99
October	31	69	126
November	29	71	102
December	36	64	91

who were generally in favour of receiving training, helped to address his concerns.

Benefits

Now the new system is in place, and the challenges have been addressed, the main aims of freeing up pharmacist time, enhancing the role of technicians and streamlining CD handling policy throughout the Northumbria Healthcare NHS trust have largely been met.

Other staff have also benefited. For, nursing staff, the turnaround time for ward CD order books in the pharmacy department has reduced and nursing time has been released by having dispensing assistants carry out the ward top-ups. The new system also enables any concerns that ward staff have to be rapidly

dealt with by pharmacy staff, which makes for a better working environment and has improved working relationships between nursing and pharmacy staff.

Patients also benefit from the new arrangements. More efficient stock control means that they are more likely to be given their doses of CDs at the correct time. In addition, the potential risk of them being given expired stock has also reduced, because pharmacy staff now routinely check CD expiry dates.

Stock issue analysis

Throughout the project period, an analysis of the number of issues of stock CDs made to wards and departments by pharmacists and technicians was carried out. The results

are shown in Table 1. It can be seen that, as the project progressed, the percentage of issues handled by technicians increased and those handled by pharmacists decreased, suggesting that the new working practices were being successfully implemented.

It should be noted that it is not practical to totally devolve the handling of CDs to technicians and dispensing assistants for the following reasons:

- Pharmacists can be asked to supply CDs during their “on call” periods
- Pharmacists are legally required to supervise the destruction of CDs
- All new members of staff, including pharmacists, need to undertake training on the handling of CDs. The work associated with carrying out this training needs to be allocated sensibly and fairly
- Because the pharmacy department at Hexham General Hospital is relatively small, work duties tend to overlap and are not necessarily allocated to specific staff members

Satisfaction survey

Opinions of managers on the eight wards and departments at Hexham General hospital where CDs are used were surveyed using a Likert scale satisfaction questionnaire. The results are shown in Table 2. It can be seen that there is a marked difference in customer satisfaction now that the project has been completed.

Audit

The medicines management strategy in place at Northumbria Healthcare Trust required an audit to be carried out to ensure that prescriptions for CDs written by trust staff adhered to the appropriate regulatory requirements. It was decided that I should be responsible for organising this audit. To do this, I enlisted the help of the trust’s clinical excellence team and composed a suitable form and SOP. The audit was carried out on a trust-wide basis by assessing whether all the legal requirements for CDs had been adhered to on all discharge and outpatient prescriptions for CDs received by pharmacy staff during a one week period. It is to be repeated annually.

Conclusion

Various benefits have been realised by implementing technician-focused CD management at Hexham General Hospital. These include the release of pharmacists’ time for ward-based clinical duties, greater job satisfaction for technicians and pharmacy assistants and better working relationships between ward and pharmacy staff.

Table 2: Results of a customer satisfaction survey about Controlled Drug (CD) systems carried out on eight wards or departments at Hexham General Hospital

Question: How satisfied were you with the system for ordering CDs from the pharmacy department before the changes in the system?

Response:

Very satisfied	0
Satisfied	0
Neutral	0
Dissatisfied	0
Very dissatisfied	8

Question: Has the system been improved by the routine top up of CDs by pharmacy staff?

Response:

Much improved	6
Improved	2
Neutral	0
Worsened	0
Much worsened	0

Question: Has the system improved since pharmacy technicians have been involved in the routine supply of CDs?

Response:

Much improved	6
Improved	2
Neutral	0
Worsened	0
Much worsened	0

Question: How satisfied are you with the system of ordering CDs from the pharmacy department now that all of the changes have been implemented?

Response:

Very satisfied	6
Satisfied	2
Neutral	0
Dissatisfied	0
Very dissatisfied	0