



Brad Wright participated in stakeholder discussions around the design of Ontario Regulation 298/12, which held manufacturers responsible for ensuring the public had access to pharmacy-based take-back programs for sharps and unused pharmaceuticals.

PHOTO BY NANCY PAIVA

If They Can Do It in Canada, Why Not California?

A model for the safe and easy disposal of pills and sharps lies just to the north

by Shannon Springmeyer

California has a hodgepodge of programs allowing consumers to dispose of potentially dangerous medications and sharps. But our neighbors to the north have a sustainable solution, one that doesn't burden the taxpayer or ratepayer.

Pharmacies throughout Canada have been offering free take-back for unused medications and sharps since the early 1990s. Not only is this service good for the environment and public health and safety, it is also good for business, according to Brad Wright, principal consultant for Environment and Resources Consulting in Toronto. Pharmacies began voluntarily collecting and disposing of sharps and unused medications as an additional service to attract customers to their retail locations, he says.

Pharmacy-based take-back programs make a lot of sense, offering convenience and accessibility to customers, as well as expertise in managing these materials safely, Wright says. However, a significant percentage of the materials collected in such programs ended up in the municipal hazardous and special waste collection system — at the taxpayers' expense.

To address this problem, lawmakers in Ontario turned to a regulatory model based on extended producer responsibility (EPR), a strategy for placing responsibility for end-of-life product management on the producers, rather than externalized onto government.

Wright was formerly the vice president of Stericycle

Canada, a firm that provided services to pharmacies ensuring safe disposal for their collection programs. He participated in stakeholder meetings to develop effective EPR regulation for the disposal of pharmaceuticals and sharps. Ontario Regulation 298/12 came into effect on Oct. 1, 2012, and assigned responsibility for end-of-life management of pharmaceutical waste and sharps to the manufacturers, without dictating how they accomplish this. This allowed manufacturers to work collectively through the national Health Products Stewardship Association, which built upon and expanded the existing pharmacy-based disposal network on behalf of industry, while the manufacturers assumed the costs instead of taxpayers.

"The province of Ontario is now a year and a half into it, and both programs are operating exceptionally well," Wright says. "The burden of cost shifted from the retail pharmacy to industry. And with the shift in that burden of cost, pharmacy enrollment in the program for collecting this material tripled. Better accessibility for the consumer means that more material is being returned to these collection locations by the consumer, and less of it is making its way into the environment."

Now, California may get its chance to follow Canada's lead. State Sen. Hannah-Beth Jackson has been actively working over the past year to enact EPR legislation for pharmaceuticals, which she hopes will garner support in the Senate and Assembly.

Wright suggests that the success of EPR programs in Canada for these products, going back a decade, could be examined by industry and lawmakers alike in California.

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BRAD WRIGHT

PRINCIPAL CONSULTANT FOR ENVIRONMENT AND RESOURCES CONSULTING

"The onus in terms of liability has to be on the individual producer, and what they really should do is look to the excellent example here in Canada — in B.C., Manitoba, and Ontario — of how these programs have been operating for years, and operating very effectively, meeting targets in getting this material managed properly," Wright says.