

Other Countries' Programs

Australia

Program Overview: Australia's Return Unwanted Medicines (RUM) Project, initiated in July 1998, is a permanent, national, government-financed program that provides for unwanted and expired medicines to be collected by community pharmacies. The program was launched in full force after a Return Unwanted Medicine Week beginning on December 1st, 2002.

Commonwealth funds currently cover these costs with significant support from the pharmaceutical industry. Community pharmacies collect these medicines at no cost to consumers, and pharmaceutical wholesalers have agreed to a dramatic discount in charges for delivery and collection of containers to pharmacies. Residents can return unwanted or expired medicines to any pharmacy at any time. The returned medicines are then disposed of safely by the pharmacies; they are in no way reused or recycled. The program has established protocols on how to manage the waste. It also relies heavily on support from state and local government agencies to initiate consumer awareness campaigns and produce media releases.

The RUM Program has achieved tremendous success due to the clarity and simplicity of the program. Consumers are simply asked to bring expired or unwanted medicines to any pharmacy where the pharmacist collects them in a special bin for correct disposal.

Sites: All unwanted and expired pharmaceutical products can be returned to any pharmacy at any time. The RUM Program incorporated over 5,000 pharmacies throughout Australia.

Key Motivation: The RUM Project was implemented as a result of concern for both human and environmental health. The RUM website, www.returnmed.com.au, cites the following three reasons for initiating the program:

- In an average week, around 50 children are admitted to the hospital after swallowing medicines not intended for them. Additionally, according to a report published in the Australian Institute of Health, "76% of child medicine poisoning cases occur in the home."
- The Australian population aged 65 and over is expected to double by 2051. Such individuals use far more medications, and proper pharmaceutical disposal will reduce the rate of self diagnosis and treatment of new ailments with left over medicines.
- Unwanted chemicals are often dumped in the toilet, down the sink, or thrown out in the trash, which can harm the environment.

Organizing Body: The RUM project was organized, and is funded, by the Commonwealth Department of Health.

Partners: The RUM Project has also been supported by the Commonwealth Department of Health and Aging, the Pharmacy Guild of Australia, the Pharmaceutical Society of Australia, and the Australian Institute of Environmental Health. It is also widely supported by the pharmaceutical industry in Australia.

Level of Implementation: The RUM project is now enacted on a national level. However, the initial medication return program, known as the National Return & Disposal of Unwanted

Medicines Limited, a not-for-profit company, was originally registered exclusively in South Australia.

Cost: The program has a budget of \$5 million Australian dollars (US \$3.75 million) to operate from 2001 to 2006. Annually, the project costs US \$750,800 or \$1.47 per pound of pharmaceutical waste.

Outcome: Between 1998 and 2002, 1,675,513 pounds of medicines were collected and destroyed through the RUM Project—enough to overflow an Olympic-sized swimming pool. In 2005 alone, the RUM project collected 696,241 pounds of pharmaceutical waste, or 413 million pills, and served 21 million people.

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