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How well do we know about common medications? The paracetamol alarm!

We all get a firm grounding in clinical pharmacology and therapeutics at medical school and it is buttressed well in clinical settings as we progress in careers. Clinicians at every level need to know comprehensively about indications, contra-indications, dosages, adverse and side effects, interactions and toxicity of the drugs that they use. In the case of medications that are not commonly used, we have recourse to refer formularies, texts or online resources.

The study by Wimalasiri & Jayasinghe, published in this issue of the *GMJ* rings an alarm bell. Paracetamol is a widely used medication for its antipyretic and analgesic effects. Moreover, it is freely available to be purchased without a prescription. However, it is common to see accidental paediatric ingestion, unintentional self-administered suprathreshold ingestions or intentional self-poisoning at the emergency care settings. Although paracetamol is safe in normal doses, it can be hepatotoxic in suprathreshold doses even reaching fatality. In their study, interestingly Wimalasiri & Jayasinghe, found that 98% of caregivers (doctors and nurses) knew the correct dose of paracetamol in a paediatric setting, while only 7% knew about the maximum safe daily dose. At the same time, nearly only about one half were aware about the maximum acute single toxic dose the drug.

It seems that we simply take the knowledge about safe use of common drugs for granted. A result of this study is an eye opener to all medical educators and clinicians. The paucity highlighted call for an urgent remedial action at all levels including with focused continuing professional education of all relevant health care workers (including doctors and nurses) about medication safety and other therapeutic

aspects. It needs to ensure that the knowledge gained is retained and practically used. This in turn will ensure the delivery of high-quality health care. We need to permanently stop the “paracetamol alarm” without merely snoozing it!

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