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EcoConsumer

Unused drugs threat to environment, safety

Largely ignored just five years ago, disposal of unused prescription drugs has bubbled to the surface as a significant environmental and public-safety concern.

By Tom Watson

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For better or worse, we're a medicated nation. Drug companies sell more than \$4 billion worth of drugs in Washington state alone every year. Because roughly one-third of those medicines never get used, we need to dispose of them properly.

Few green issues have evolved so quickly. Largely ignored just five years ago, drug disposal has bubbled to the surface as a significant environmental and public- safety concern.

Q: What's wrong with the way unwanted drugs are handled now?

A: Many of us simply leave old medicines in a drawer and forget about them, creating the potential for accidental poisonings and drug abuse. Six of the top 10 substances causing poisonings in our state in 2009 were over-the-counter or prescription drugs. Human medications are also the No. 1 cause of pet poisonings.

In another sobering statistic, health experts estimate that 12 percent of Washington youth ages 12-17 abuse medicines, often finding them at home.

When old drugs do get thrown out, many people follow old advice and flush them down the drain. That's no longer acceptable because research shows that chemicals from drugs end up in lakes, rivers, Puget Sound and even our soils. Most of those chemicals are not removed by wastewater treatment or septic systems.

A trove of information on unwanted drugs, from potential dangers to solutions, can be found at www.TakeBackYourMeds.org. The statewide Take Back Your Meds campaign is supported by more than 120 organizations, including law-enforcement agencies, local governments, health agencies and nonprofits.

Q: So what's the solution?

A: Since manufacturers of drugs profit from their sale, the ultimate answer is for those companies to finance a return program for unwanted medicines, according to the Take Back Your Meds coalition. While governments and a few pharmacies support and operate existing temporary drug take-back programs, they can't continue to bear the financial load. A "product stewardship" bill being considered by the Washington state Legislature would require drug manufacturers to pay the costs of setting up a take-back system. The pharmaceutical industry opposes this approach, claiming it is unnecessary and would result in increased costs for consumers. Proponents say the cost to drug companies would be infinitesimal compared with their advertising budget and profits.

Q: What should I do with unwanted drugs now?

A: To find a temporary drug take-back location near you, visit www.TakeBackYourMeds.org and search the listings by city or ZIP code. If you live in King County, you can also call the Household Hazards Line at 206-296-4692. Finding a collection location can be especially challenging in less-populated areas. More than two-thirds of Washington's 39 counties currently have no drug take-back locations.

Collection locations in King County include selected Bartell Drugs stores, Group Health pharmacies and several police stations. Special drug-collection events may also occasionally be held. None of these programs charge a fee.

Pharmacies cannot currently accept controlled substances such as morphine, while most participating police stations accept all medicines. Collected drugs are destroyed by incineration.

Q: Are there any other disposal options?

A: In a new program offered at Walgreens drugstores, customers can purchase a postage-paid envelope for \$2.99 at the pharmacy counter and mail in unwanted medications (no controlled substances) for proper disposal.

Mixing old drugs with a material such as kitty litter and putting them in the garbage has been recommended in the past as a last resort, but this is no longer encouraged because most leftover medicines are considered household hazardous waste.

Q: How is this issue being addressed elsewhere?

A: Most Canadian provinces have drug company-funded collection programs (www.medicationsreturn.ca). No states in the U.S. have yet passed drug take-back legislation, but in December the San Francisco Board of Supervisors gave preliminary approval to a citywide take-back program funded by the drug companies.

It's encouraging that our society has begun to recognize and address the problems surrounding unused drugs. We can all help improve public safety and the environment if we "just say no" to improper drug disposal.

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