

HCWH Europe Position Statement – April 2014

Pharmaceutical residues are ubiquitously found in soil, ground- and drinking water globally and constitute a major health and environmental concern likely to rise in the future. For example, a study in Germany found over 150 pharmaceutical agents in various environmental media in Germany, discovering that even drinking water could contain these pollutants¹. To raise awareness about pharmaceuticals in the environment HCWH Europe has created a website: <http://www.pharmaenvironment.org>

HCWH Europe is working for the reduction of prescribed pharmaceuticals, endorsing take back schemes of unused pharmaceuticals, supporting the adoption of innovative wastewater treatment methods and promoting green pharmacy.

HCWH Europe calls on governments and stakeholders to take action to reduce release of pharmaceuticals into the environment. The following issues should be addressed globally:

1. Require an Environmental Risk Assessment for “old” pharmaceuticals. Many of the pharmaceuticals detected in the environment are old pharmaceuticals that did not require an environmental risk assessment at the time of licencing and have been emitted for several decades.
2. Enable consistent Environmental Risk Assessments and monitoring globally. Guidance documents should assist national governments in guaranteeing that pharmaceuticals are evaluated and monitored at equal standards globally.
3. Identify, develop and promote innovative wastewater treatment technologies that increase efficient removal of pharmaceuticals.
4. Promote awareness-raising and educational campaigns for the general public on the environmental risks of pharmaceuticals and on how to improve disposal practices. The impact of pharmaceutical residues in the environment is not well understood by citizens. Healthcare professionals, in particular doctors and pharmacists, should be trained and should provide information to patients on the disposal of pharmaceuticals.
5. Support upstream measures to avoid the impact of pharmaceuticals in the environment
6. Ensure environmental justice by including environmental emissions rule in the Global Manufacturing Practice. Pharmaceutical products are often manufactured in low-income countries causing great pollution to the environment as environmental laws are lacking or not properly implemented.

HCWH Europe calls on countries to implement the following actions to prevent harm from pharmaceutical residues:

1. Design and produce green pharmaceuticals that rapidly biodegrade in the environment into harmless compounds.
2. Educate healthcare professionals to optimise medicines prescription behaviour so that only the right amount of pharmaceutical products needed is prescribed and the least environmentally hazardous pharmaceuticals are prescribed.
3. Raise awareness on and safely collect unused and expired drugs and always incinerate pharmaceuticals at high temperatures. This would prevent citizens from flushing medicines down the toilet.

Health Care Without Harm (HCWH) works to transform the healthcare sector worldwide so it is no longer a source of harm to people and the environment. HCWH is a leading advocate for environmental health and justice across the globe. Being an international coalition of more than 500 organisations in 53 countries and with offices on four continents, HCWH works with health professionals, hospitals, health systems, local and regional authorities, collaborates with Ministries of Health, international organisations and NGOs. For more information contact; Grazia Cioci, Deputy Director, T: +32 2503 0481 E: grazia.cioci@hcwh.org W: <http://noharm.org> and <http://www.greenhospitals.net/> and <http://www.mercuryfreehealthcare.org/>

1 http://www.umweltbundesamt.de/uba-info-presse-e/2012/pe12-007_painkillers_contaminate_germanys_waterbodies.htm