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Cleaning up the right way

UM research reduces water pollution from discarded pills

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Posted: 10/4/07

The University of Maine's Center on Aging is launching a first-in-the-nation program aimed at helping consumers get rid of excess drugs in a way that's free and environmentally friendly.

This program surfaces as a result of several decades of people being told to flush their leftover drugs. Recently, public officials have urged the public to stop flushing their unwanted drugs after more rivers, streams and even some public water supplies began testing positive for amounts of pharmaceuticals.

The program also comes from a 2004 bill passed by the Maine Legislature, creating an unused pharmaceuticals disposal program. The program could accept private funds, but no state money was set aside. This spring, the University's Center on Aging received a \$150,000 grant from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency for the mail-back of prescription drugs.

"The Center's grant from the U.S. EPA will allow us to roll out the project in two phases," Lenard Kaye, Center on Aging director, said. "In phase one we will distribute the mailers at participating pharmacies in the Kennebec, Penobscot, Cumberland and Aroostook counties and in phase two we will expand the project statewide to all 16 counties."

The Center on Aging is a university-wide, interdisciplinary center specializing in aging, education, research and community service. The mission of the center is to serve the state by maximizing the quality of life of Maine's older citizens and their families.

The goals of the center's project are two-fold. First to devise, implement and evaluate a mail back plan to remove unused and unwanted medications, both prescription and over-the-counter, from residences and dispose of them in compliance with applicable state and federal laws and sound environmental policies. Secondly, to test the effectiveness of an educational campaign about the hazards to life, health and the environment posed by improper storage and disposal of unwanted medications.

The mailers will, at first, only be provided to older adults and their caregivers. Kaye said they envision a third phase which would provide mailers to all interested, regardless of their age. Recently, a bill was passed to provide state funds to the Maine Drug Enforcement Agency. These funds will allow the project to serve all ages across the state.

The pre-paid mailers will be made available to the public through pharmacies and medical clinics. Unused drugs will be put in the mailers, which will go to the Maine Drug Enforcement Agency where pharmacists will open some to see what types of drugs are being discarded. These drugs will be catalogued and destroyed.

"Unwanted pharmaceutical collection and measurement as envisioned by this project has a myriad of environmental and social benefits." Kaye said.

The collection of these prescriptions could prevent increasingly evident environmental exposure and impacts from improper disposal, especially to the aquatic ecosystems. It could minimize accidental overdoses by people, pets and wildlife and limit opportunities for drug-related crimes and subsequent abuse. The project could also provide an alternative to drug stockpiling in homes, preclude bad drug donations and facilitate pharmaco-economic assessments of waste and prescriptions, insurance and reimbursement and dispensing policies and practices.

"There is the opportunity for student involvement within multiple aspects of the project including research, marketing, and education," Jennifer Crittenden, research associate at the Center of Aging, said. "We are also looking for older adults to serve as community educators for the project."

Anyone interested in being a part of this project should contact Jennifer Crittenden at 262-7923 or by email at Jennifer.crittenden@umit.maine.edu.

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