

Labelling & Packaging of Unlicensed Specials Medicines: Best Practice Guidance for the NHS

Dear Colleague

Medication errors account for approximately 10% of all incidents reported to the National Reporting & Learning System and include many look-alike/sound-alike (LASA) errors. LASA errors can occur during prescribing, dispensing, supply, or administration of medicines and can lead to administration of the wrong medication with potentially fatal consequences.

Following two LASA errors involving Specials reported in 2020, and the subsequent publication of a National Patient Safety Alert, NHS England and NHS Improvement committed to working with NHS and non-NHS manufacturers of Specials to agree guidance promoting best practice on the labelling and packaging of Specials.

Whilst adoption of this guidance will support staff and help to reduce errors and improve patient safety, it should be remembered that one of the underpinning principles of safe medicines use is that all staff must carefully read the label before the supply, dispensing or administration of any medicine.

There is an expectation that:

- NHS Manufacturing Units will adopt this guidance, to ensure that the labelling and packaging of Specials meets the requirements of the NHS
- NHS pharmacy procurement teams will use the guidance to support risk assessment when purchasing Specials
- Non-NHS manufacturers will consider how they can apply the principles of this guidance to further improve the labelling and packaging of their products.

We fully support the recommendations made in this document and ask Chief Pharmacists to:

- Review their existing SOPs to ensure the suitability of Specials, including packaging and labelling, is assessed during sourcing.
- Ensure that Specials are quarantined on receipt and checked against the specification agreed with the supplier before release for use.
- Ensure, where relevant, that their licensed pharmacy manufacturing unit
 - has appropriate packaging and labelling capability, or develops a plan to buy and implement it
 - develops and implements SOPs and processes to ensure compliance with the principles described in the guidance.



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