



Kansas RTAP Fact Sheet

A Service of The University of Kansas Transportation Center for Rural Transit Providers

Prescription Drugs and Over-the-Counter Medications: New FTA Recommendations

by Janet Blue and Pat Weaver

A recurring topic of discussion in the transit industry is the use of prescription and over-the-counter drug by rural transit drivers—and any possible effects of these medications on safely transporting passengers. A related topic is whether and how transit managers should monitor use of medications by drivers.

While use of prescription and over-the-counter drugs certainly is not limited to older persons, it is true that elderly individuals use prescription drugs approximately three times as frequently as the general population. “The use of over-the-counter (OTC) medications by this group is even more extensive,” according to a report in the *Psychiatric Times*, April 1999.

A high percentage of rural transit drivers are over the age of 65. Also, the general population is more predisposed to take over-the-counter medication than at any other time in history. These considerations require that drivers, their doctors, and their managers be aware of any possible use, overuse or interactions that would interfere with a driver’s ability to drive safely.

The purpose of this article is to address recent recommendations made by the Federal Transit Administration (FTA) and to suggest components to consider in creating an agency policy on prescription and OTC drugs.

FTA forwards recommendations to transit agencies

In May 2000 the Federal Transit Administration Acting Administrator, Nuria Fernandez, sent a letter to all the states addressing prescription and over-the-counter drug policies in transit agencies. This letter has spurred reviews of existing

policies by transit agencies throughout the country. KDOT’s Drug and Alcohol Program Coordinator, Janet Blue, has received numerous requests for information on how to address these recommendations.

Fernandez’s letter recommended that agencies develop policies on prescription and OTC drugs. Although not a requirement of already-existing drug and alcohol programs, the FTA is strongly encouraging this action to promote safety.

Suggested prescription/OTC program components

There are several program components to consider in developing prescription/OTC policies:

- Consider requiring safety-sensitive employees to enter into a dialogue with their prescribing physician regarding the side effects of prescription or OTC medications and to inquire into alternative treatment options.
- Consider requiring safety-sensitive employees to report prescriptions/OTCs to the transit system medical department or MRO for review. Transit systems without medical staff commonly require their employees to obtain a release to work statement from their prescribing physician.
- Consider issuing a medical disqualification to individuals taking prescriptions/OTCs that may jeopardize their ability to safely perform their safety-sensitive job function for as long as they are taking the medication.
- Include in employee training programs information about the risk of using prescriptions/OTCs and a list of potential problem medications. Training for drivers should also include knowing to check the alcohol content of medications, reading warning labels and taking



the medications exactly as prescribed. Employees must be informed of the disciplinary consequences when prescriptions and over-the-counter drugs are used in violation of the policy.

Help is on the way

The Consortium, Inc., and KDOT will be holding several training workshops across the state in 2001 for collection site managers and agency drug and alcohol program managers. These workshops will be two-day sessions with ample time for questions and answers, and will include advice on setting up a prescription and OTC drug policy.

For more information regarding developing prescription/OTC drug policies and providing training to drivers, several information hotlines and on-line sources are available. One resource is the National Clearinghouse for Alcohol and Drug Information. Their web site is www.health.org/govpubs/ or call them 800/487-4889. Check page 15 for a list of other publications that might be useful in developing a prescription and over-the-counter drug policy.

Sources

1. *FTA Drug and Alcohol Regulation Options*, Issue 16, page 2, Fall 2000.
2. "Prescription and Over-the-Counter Medication Can Affect Fitness to Drive," *Tap In*, Issue 3, 2000.
3. "Use and Abuse of Psychoactive Prescription Drugs and Over-the-Counter Medications," National Clearinghouse for Alcohol and Drug Information, www.health.org/govpubs/BKD250/26f.btm.

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The *Merck Manual, Home Edition* provides a checklist for over-the-counter drugs:

Guidelines for Choosing and Using Over-the-Counter Drugs

- Make sure that a self-diagnosis is as accurate as possible. Don't assume the symptoms are for "something that's going around."
- Select products on the basis of rational planning and ingredients, not because they're labeled with a familiar brand name.
- Choose a product with the fewest appropriate ingredients. Remedies that attempt to relieve every possible symptom are likely to expose people to unnecessary drugs, pose additional risks, and cost more.
- When in doubt, check with a pharmacist or doctor for the most appropriate ingredient or product.
- Have a pharmacist check for potential interactions with other drugs being used.
- Read the label carefully to determine the proper dose and precautions. Find out what conditions would make the drug a poor choice.
- Ask the pharmacist to write down possible adverse effects.
- Do not exceed the recommended dose.
- Never take an OTC drug longer than the maximum time suggested on the label. Stop taking the drug if symptoms get worse.
- Keep all drugs, including OTC drugs, out of the reach of children.

Source: www.merck.com/pubs/mmanual_home/sec2/13.htm, *The Merck Manual of Medical Information, Home Edition*, Section 2, Drugs, Chapter 13.