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News Release

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Better labelling would cut paracetamol risks, expert advises

Products containing paracetamol should be better labelled to avoid accidental overdoses, a leading academic has cautioned.

Speaking tonight at an event as part of the Edinburgh International Science Festival, Professor Nick Bateman will highlight the dangers of taking more than one paracetamol product to tackle different ailments.

The warning comes as figures estimate it is costing millions of pounds each year to treat paracetamol poisoning in the UK – placing extra burden on already strained hospital resources.

Taking too much paracetamol is most commonly associated with self-harm, but many deaths from paracetamol overdose are accidental – often people do not realise that they are in danger and don't seek medical attention early enough.

Paracetamol is included in combination products marketed for pain relief and is also used in cough and cold remedies. Prof Bateman says that the problem arises because the paracetamol content of different preparations varies and people may find labels confusing. Some branded cough and cold medicines include products with paracetamol and others without, which have the same or similar names.

Around 90,000 people a year attend accident and emergency units in the UK each year as a result of paracetamol overdose. About half of these will be admitted to hospital. It is the most common cause of overdose in the UK but deaths are rare - between 150 and 250 people die each year from paracetamol poisoning.

Prof Bateman, who is a retired Professor of Clinical Toxicology at the University of Edinburgh, said: "In normal doses, paracetamol is a safe and effective painkiller. However, it is relatively easy to combine drugs for different ailments – for example cold cures and headache tablets – and overdose accidentally.

"Products that contain paracetamol should be better labelled so that people are more aware of the medicines that they are taking."

Ranked among the top universities in the world

Professor Bateman currently chairs the Home Office Poisons Board, which provides expert advice to the UK government on the control of poisonous substances. A trained doctor, he was a Consultant Physician at the Royal Infirmary of Edinburgh until his retirement from clinical practice in March 2013.

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