

*The following article was published in a regular column that appears in [Hospital News](#).
January 2004*

Look-Alike and Sound-Alike Drug Names – A Step Forward

Research from the United States shows that 10,000 patient injuries each year are caused by drug name confusion.¹ Furthermore, 29% of pharmacy dispensary errors result from failure to accurately identify drug types.²

Some examples of confused health product brand names leading to serious medication errors include:¹

- Accutane / Accupril
- Celebrex / Celexa / Cerebyx
- Losec / Lasix
- Narcan / Norcuron
- Zantac / Zyrtec
- Lamictal / Lamisil (resulted in hospitalization)
- Taxol / Taxotere – (resulted in patient death)
- Seroquel / Serzone – (resulted in patient death)

Factors that can lead to a medication error and contribute to name confusion include:

- drug names appear similar when written;
- drug names sound similar when pronounced in person or by phone;

¹ Michèle Chadwick, "Look-alike Sound-alike (LA/SA) Health Product Names: Developing a Common Understanding" – Consultative Workshop, Chateau Cartier Resort Gatineau, QC, Canada, October 20-21, 2003. Available at http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/hpfb-dgpsa/bgtd-dpbtg/m_chadwick_oct20_e.html. Accessed January 9, 2004.

- products are stored close together in pharmacies;
- products have the same strengths (e.g., 100 mg and 200 mg);
- products have the same dosing intervals;
- products have similar uses; and
- products have similar appearance.

With an estimated 24,000 therapeutic health products currently on the Canadian market,³ it is small wonder that drug name similarities crop up to cause confusion among practitioners, pharmacists and patients. Health Canada's growing concern about the potential dangers of look-alike sound-alike (LA/SA) health product names has prompted further activity to confront the problem in 2004.

According to Linda Searson, Acting Project Manager for Health Canada's Policy and Promotion Division, a working group spearheading the LA/SA initiative will submit policy recommendations to senior management for approval in March. The Working Group takes into consideration the interests of 38 stakeholders including industry associations, government, healthcare professionals, non-governmental organizations and the attendees of the LA/SA Health Product Names Consultative Workshop in Gatineau Québec from October 20-21, 2003. According to Searson, "Health Canada's new approach will largely depend on the feedback received from the workshop consultations of last October."

² L. Leape, D.W. Bates, D.J. Collen, et al., "Systems analysis of adverse drug events," JAMA, 1995; 274: 35-43.

³ ADM Opening Remarks - Look-Alike Sound-Alike (LA/SA) Health Product Names - Consultative Workshop, October 20, 2003. Available at http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/hpfb-dgpsa/tpd-dpt/index_activities_consultation_e.html. Accessed January 9, 2004.

Searson says that the new LA/SA strategy implementations will begin in the fiscal year from April, 2004 through March, 2005. Work to date has included defining the problem, identifying a number of pre- and post- market options to address it, and analyzing and ranking them.

Interested parties who attended the workshop, such as the Institute for Safe Medication Practices Canada (ISMP Canada), supportively await the Health Canada's steps to regulate and implement policy where no consistent or formal review process previously existed. Currently, the Health Products and Food Branch, responsible for the review of drug names, approaches conflicts somewhat arbitrarily, without the use of systems to flag similar names.

Among the first recommendations under consideration by the Working Group is a computer application that would screen health product names and identify problematic ones for review. In addition, manufacturers and suppliers who file submissions for proposed health products would be required to show that a name does not have LA/SA similarities to existing products.

Another recommendation includes post-market monitoring of LA/SA health product names. If a drug were found to pose sufficient risk of harm due to potential medication errors, the manufacturer would be subject to imposed market intervention in the form of issuing fact sheets, *Dear Health Care Professional* letters, and undertaking name/labelling changes to products.⁴

⁴ "Issue Analysis Summary: Look-alike Sound-alike (LA/SA) Health Product Names: The Development of a Comprehensive Policy Recommendation," October 17, 2003.

“Health Canada is positioned to set important mechanisms in place,” says Sylvia Hyland, Vice-President, ISMP Canada. Hyland believes that along with Health Canada, drug manufacturers and interested groups that monitor drug safety issues, such as ISMP Canada, should regard the LA/SA issue as a shared responsibility.

For information on how to find out more about the LA/SA Names initiative, visit Health Canada’s website at www.hc-sc.gc.ca. For information on how to help prevent medication errors with look-alike sound-alike drug names, visit the ISMP (U.S.) website at www.ismp.org.

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