

# Drug companies should pay for the proper disposal of leftover drugs

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**Americans purchase and take a lot of prescription drugs.** Americans also have a lot of prescription drugs left over that go unused. These leftover drugs need to be disposed of properly. They will cause environmental damage if they are flushed down the toilet. They can be abused by family members and friends. These drugs can cause accidental poisoning of children, older adults and pets. They also can be an easy target for burglars who want to cash in on their street value.

Although it is hard to estimate just how many leftover prescription drugs are sitting in medicine cabinets, when the federal Drug Enforcement Administration held its annual National Prescription Drug Take-Back Day earlier this month, people drove down to their local police stations and turned in 447 tons of unwanted prescription drugs.

In other countries, such as in Canada and Europe, the pharmaceutical companies fund a take-back

program that enables people to return their unwanted drugs and sharps to the pharmacy. These programs provide a safe and inexpensive way to dispose of leftover drugs as well as needles that are used to inject medicines such as insulin.

Having manufacturers pay for the disposal of the waste products they produce is a fundamental goal of the California Product Stewardship Council, which has worked with our N&R Publications division on multiple publications advocating for these goals. The council, led by Heidi Sanborn, has played a key role in supporting groundbreaking legislation and regulation requiring producers to share in the responsibility for managing hazardous products at end-of-life.

This legislation has helped to transform the waste management process for many products, such as batteries, paint, fluorescent lights, mattresses, carpets and more. Now they are leftover prescription drugs.

And they are getting pushback from the pharmaceutical companies, which, despite making huge profits year after year, want the general public to pay the cost of disposing of their products.

Back in 2012, when Alameda County passed a pioneering ordinance requiring pharmaceutical companies to fund a local take-back program, Big Pharma lobbied to squash this groundbreaking program. The case went all the way to the Ninth U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals, but Alameda County won. And now other California counties such as Marin, Santa Clara, San Francisco and Santa Barbara have voted to start their own take-back programs.

Some critics argue that the state, and not the counties, should oversee the pharmaceutical take-back program. The state could set consistent guidelines and thereby avoid the confusion of having different regulations in different counties.

But the notion that our donation-hungry state legislators might produce a well-thought-out program over the objections of Big Pharma is not in the realm of political possibility. What is possible is for individual counties like Sacramento to learn from the example of other counties how best to develop an effective program. Storing unused or unwanted medications in medicine cabinets is a recipe for disaster. Flushing them down the toilet is bad for the environment.

Sacramento County needs a producer-funded prescription drug take-back program. Proper disposal, funded by the drug companies, will help protect both people and the environment. Lives are at stake.