HEALTH REGULATION AND LICENSING ADMINISTRATION
&
HEALTH OCCUPATIONS BOARDS

BOARD OF PHARMACY
AUTHORITY FOR GUIDANCE

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POLICY STATEMENT

GUIDANCE ON USE OF DRUG ABBREVIATIONS ON MEDICATION LABELS

This policy statement is issued to clarify that pharmacists may not use drug abbreviations on medication labels.

Common abbreviations can lead to inadvertent toxicities. For example, acetaminophen is widely available in over-the-counter as well as prescription products. Though clear to health care professionals, consumers may be unaware that prescription labels indicating the drug abbreviation, APAP, is actually acetaminophen. The patient is thus at risk for hepatotoxicity even if vigilantly comparing the active ingredients of prescribed and over-the-counter medications. The risk of liver injury primarily occurs when patients take multiple products containing acetaminophen at one time and exceed the current maximum dose of 4000 mg within a 24-hour period. Therefore, the practice of abbreviating the full name of a drug may potentially lead to medication errors and endanger public safety.

The District of Columbia Pharmacy regulations require that every medication label include “the generic, chemical, or brand name of the drug unless omission is specifically requested by the prescriber in writing.” Title 22 District of Columbia Municipal Regulations § 1912.2(e).