Research has shown analgesics (painkillers) can be effective in treating musculoskeletal pain and up to 10% of all prescriptions issued in general practice are for analgesics. Analgesics can vary in strength (mild, moderate, strong), in the way they are taken (tablets, patches or topical creams), and some have anti-inflammatory actions whilst others do not. There are over 300 analgesics available to GPs to prescribe. To aid doctors in their choice, the Medicines and Health Products Regulatory Agency (MHRA) and NICE have produced guidance on the safe prescribing of analgesics for musculoskeletal pain. We assessed whether these guidelines have changed the way GPs prescribe analgesics.

**Cox-2 non-steroidal anti-inflammatories (NSAIDs)**

- In Dec 2004 – Feb 2005 MHRA advised GPs to stop using Cox-2 NSAIDs in patients with heart disease due to increased risks of cardiovascular events.
- In North Staffordshire, this advice was associated with a significant decrease in the use of Cox-2 NSAIDs (Figure 1).

*Figure 1: Changes in North Staffordshire NSAID prescribing 2002-2009*
In Jan 2005, MHRA advised to stop using co-proxamol due to linked high fatality rates involving both intentional and accidental overdose.

- Co-proxamol use declined significantly at this time (Figure 2) and was replaced with alternative paracetamol and opioid combination analgesics with similar painkilling effect.

**Figure 2:** Changes in North Staffordshire co-proxamol and combination analgesic prescribing 2002-2009

Moderate analgesics include codeine 15mg, nefopam, buprenorphine (200mcg tablets or 5 -10mcg/hr patches), dihydrocodeine 20mg alone or in combination with paracetamol.

**TOPICAL NSAIDs**

- In Feb 2008, NICE osteoarthritis (OA) guidelines encouraged topical NSAID use.

- The upward trend in prescriptions of topical NSAIDs prior to 2008 increased significantly after the guidelines were published (Figure 3).

**Figure 3:** Changes in North Staffordshire topical NSAID prescribing 2002-2009

Safe prescribing is achievable if key guidance is integrated into local prescribing policy.

Useful links: MHRA (www.mhra.gov.uk/); NICE OA Guidelines (www.nice.org.uk/cg59)