

*Pharmacies give people a place to dispose of unused drugs, needles*  
*Jondi Gunz, Santa Cruz Sentinel, Calif.*

Oct. 1--Saturday is the first Sharps & Medicines Take Back Day at five local pharmacies, giving people an alternative to flushing old medications down the toilet or tossing syringes in the trash.

The event, from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m., aims to make people aware of a newly created safe disposal system with 30 permanent collection sites, set up by Santa Cruz County with a \$200,000 state grant.

Funds became available after the governor signed SB 966 last October, requiring the state to develop a solution for proper disposal of pharmaceutical waste. Rebecca Kassel of Aptos suggested the idea to Sen. Joe Simitian, D-Palo Alto, when she was a high school senior.

"We're pioneering it," said Jo Fleming, coordinator of Sharp Solutions for Home Medicines. "The public has been begging for a program like this."

Fleming, 36, of Scotts Valley, put the program together. A mother of two, she worked for the county for five years on environmental projects, including green business.

She was very aware of the Associated Press report in March that found pharmaceuticals in treated drinking water across the nation. In California, the drugs included anti-epileptic and anti-anxiety medications.

However, the federal Drug Enforcement Agency was wary of any effort to collect regulated prescription drugs such as Vicodin.

Karin North of the city of Palo Alto and Jen Jackson of the East Bay Municipal Utility District, who worked in environmental compliance, spearheaded safe disposal days in the San Francisco Bay Area in 2006. Nearly two tons of pharmaceutical waste were collected at 39 special events; less than 10 percent of the drugs were federally regulated and no security problems arose.

"We learned from what they've done," said Fleming, emphasizing that controlled substances will not be accepted Saturday.

She has arranged for lockboxes at most of the participating pharmacies. They are similar to a postal mailbox; people can drop items in but can't take anything out. As of Sept. 1, it became illegal to dispose of used sharps in the trash; they must be enclosed in an approved container.

The quantity of expired medicine has grown significantly.

In 1975, when Santa Cruz pharmacist Mark Wilson entered the profession, "you really didn't think about it posing a problem," he explained.

That attitude has changed, especially when mail-order drugs are packaged in a 90-day supply.

"A majority of time, pills are left over," Wilson said. "It's not OK to throw away expired medications. Even if it's expired, it still has potency."

Horsnyder Pharmacy, where Wilson works, doesn't have room for a lockbox, so volunteers will help with the collection Saturday.

As one of three participants in a county pilot project, Horsnyder's collected 30-40 pounds of pharmaceutical waste every three weeks, said Wilson. Over the past year, 900 pounds of waste were collected at three sites, which included Westside Pharmacy and the Santa Cruz Police Department.

Fleming has already emptied her medicine cabinet.

"I have two grocery bags full of stuff," she said.

**CLEAN OUT YOUR MEDICINE CHEST:** Syringes in approved containers and unwanted, unused and expired drugs can be dropped off 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. Saturday at:

- Horsnyder Pharmacy, 1226A Soquel Ave, Santa Cruz.
- Lauden Pharmacy, 1840 41st Ave., Capitola.
- New Leaf Pharmacy, 6240 Highway 9, Felton.
- Watsonville Pharmacy, 1433 Freedom Blvd., Watsonville.
- Westside Pharmacy, 1401 Mission St., Santa Cruz.