

## SAFETY AND QUALITY LEARNING LETTER

| Subject               | Use of gum-based thickeners with Polyethylene glycol laxatives (macrogols)                                                                                            |
|-----------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| SPPG reference number | LL-AR-2023-047                                                                                                                                                        |
| Programme of care     | Acute Services (AS) / Older People's Services (OPS)<br>Mental Health Services (MHS) / Learning Disability (LD)<br>Maternity Services (MS) / Primary Health Care (PHC) |
| Assurances required   | 2 <sup>nd</sup> Line Assurance                                                                                                                                        |

| LEARNING SOURCE                                                                             |  |                   |  |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--|-------------------|--|
| SAI/Early Alert/Adverse incident                                                            |  | Complaint         |  |
| Audit or other review                                                                       |  | Coroner's inquest |  |
| <b>Other</b> (Please specify) - Anecdotal reports from Trusts, Primary and Domiciliary care |  |                   |  |

| SUMMARY OF EVENT                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
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| <p>This learning letter specifically relates to the prescribing of polyethylene glycol laxatives (macrogols e.g. Movicol®, Laxido®) <b>in adult service users who are co-prescribed gum-based thickeners, e.g. Nutilis Clear®, Thick and Easy Clear®.</b></p> <p>Service users with eating, drinking and swallowing difficulties (dysphagia) may need adjustments to the thickness of their fluids and texture of their food. Some service users may require thickened fluids to manage their drinks safely, however <b>thickening of liquid medications</b> should not be used routinely: it is difficult to check fluid consistency which can affect whether the medicine is swallowed safely.</p> <p>Reports from care providers highlight that where gum-based thickeners are used to thicken polyethylene glycol laxatives it takes a considerable period of time, i.e. 5 minutes or longer, for the mixture to thicken and it is difficult to check if the fluid is at the appropriate IDDSI level for safe administration to the service user. This could lead to an increased risk of aspiration if the liquid is too thin and also if it is too thick the liquid can leave residue which can be aspirated.</p> <p><b>Prescribers should consider alternatives to macrogols or other polyethylene glycol type laxatives to manage constipation in this cohort. The guidance attached (<i>Management of Constipation in Adults with Dysphagia</i>), based on <a href="#">NICE CKS Management of Constipation in Adults</a> provides useful information for the management of constipation in service users with dysphagia.</b></p> <p>The purpose of this Safety and Quality Learning Letter is to ensure healthcare professionals are aware of how to manage this risk.</p> |

## TRANSFERABLE LEARNING

Please note: starch-based thickeners such as Thick and Easy®, Nutilis® **MUST NOT** be used to thicken polyethylene glycol laxatives (macrogols e.g. Movicol®, Laxido®) as the resulting mixture is thin and watery and can lead to aspiration. See link to the [MHRA warning](#) (April 2021) detailing this.

This learning letter provides **additional information** on the use of gum-based thickeners with polyethylene glycol laxatives i.e. macrogols.

Thickening liquid medications should not be used routinely as it is difficult to check that the fluid consistency is at the correct IDDSI level for administration. This means a service user may receive a liquid they cannot swallow safely and be at risk from aspiration. The Specialist Pharmacist Service (SPS) site has guidance on [choosing formulations of medicines for adults with swallowing difficulties](#).

Prescribers should be aware that the **use of thickeners to thicken liquid medications may be 'off-label', unless this is specified within the summary of product characteristics for that product.**

Refer to [Off-label or unlicensed use of medicines: prescribers' responsibilities - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#) for more information.

Guidance is being considered for paediatric preparations of these laxatives.

## ACTION REQUIRED

### HSC Trusts should:

1. Disseminate this letter to all relevant staff and discuss it at team meetings/safety briefings.
2. Ensure the attached SPPG/PHA Guidance entitled: **Management of Constipation in Adults with Dysphagia** is shared widely across your organisation and easily accessible to all staff who prescribe or administer laxatives to service users with dysphagia who require modified fluids.
3. Review, and as necessary update, your Trust's systems, policies and procedures in light of the information in the Transferable Learning section of this letter.
4. Complete the attached 2<sup>nd</sup> Line Assurance template and return to the Governance and Safety Directorate Team, Strategic Planning and Performance Group (SPPG) of the Department of Health, at the following mailbox [alerts.SPPG@hscni.net](mailto:alerts.SPPG@hscni.net) by **12 July 2023** to confirm that actions 1-3 above have been added to the safety and quality assurance work-plan (for implementation) and monitoring processes, so as to ensure compliance.

### SPPG Director of Integrated Care should:

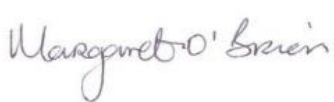
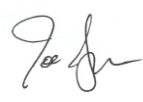
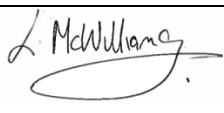
1. Disseminate this letter to GPs, GP out-of-hours services and community pharmacies.
2. Request that GPs review all adult patients with dysphagia who require thickeners to modify fluids as per SLT recommendations and are co-prescribed macrogols i.e. Movicol®/Laxido®. Discuss with the patient and/or carer laxative alternatives as per SPPG/PHA Guidance **Management of Constipation in Adults with Dysphagia** attached.

**NIMDTA should:**

1. Disseminate this letter to relevant doctors in training.

**RQIA should:**

1. Disseminate this letter to all relevant independent sector providers.
2. Implement this learning through the normal RQIA monitoring processes for assurance of implementation of guidance.
3. Ensure care homes and domiciliary care settings:
  - Incorporate the attached SPPG/PHA Guidance **Management of Constipation in Adults with Dysphagia** in medicines management training programmes.
  - Review local policies currently in place, relevant to administering medication to patients who require thickeners, to ensure they include reference to this Guidance and reflect current best practice.
  - Have a protocol in place for escalation to a GP where a carer reports an adult patient with dysphagia who requires modified fluids and is taking Movicol®/Laxido® for constipation management.

|                    |                                                                                     |                                                                                     |                                                                                      |                                                                                       |
|--------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Date issued</b> | 14 June 2023                                                                        |                                                                                     |                                                                                      |                                                                                       |
| <b>Signed:</b>     |  |  |  |  |
| <b>Issued by</b>   | Dr Margaret O'Brien<br>Head of GMS                                                  | Mr Joe Brogan<br>Head of Pharmacy and Medicines Management                          | Mrs Lisa McWilliams<br>Director of Performance Safety and Service Improvement        | Mrs Heather Reid<br>Director of Nursing Midwifery and Allied Health Professionals     |

**RE: Use of gum-based thickeners with Polyethylene glycol laxatives (macrogols) – Distribution List**

|                                                               | To – for<br>Action | Copy |                                                                                   | To – for<br>Action | Copy |
|---------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------|------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------|------|
| <b>HSC Trusts</b>                                             |                    |      | <b>PHA</b>                                                                        |                    |      |
| CEXs                                                          | ✓                  |      | CEX                                                                               |                    | ✓    |
| First point of contact                                        | ✓                  |      | Director of Public Health                                                         |                    | ✓    |
|                                                               |                    |      | Director of Nursing, Midwifery and AHPs                                           |                    | ✓    |
| <b>NIAS</b>                                                   |                    |      | Director of HSCQI                                                                 |                    | ✓    |
| CEX                                                           |                    | ✓    | AD Service Development, Safety and Quality                                        |                    |      |
| First point of contact                                        |                    | ✓    | PHA Duty Room                                                                     |                    |      |
|                                                               |                    |      | AD Health Protection                                                              |                    |      |
| <b>RQIA</b>                                                   |                    |      | AD Screening and Professional Standards                                           |                    |      |
| CEX                                                           | ✓                  |      | AD Health Improvement                                                             |                    |      |
| Director of Quality Improvement                               | ✓                  |      | ADs Nursing                                                                       |                    | ✓    |
| Director of Quality Assurance                                 | ✓                  |      | AD Allied Health Professionals                                                    |                    | ✓    |
|                                                               |                    |      |                                                                                   |                    |      |
| <b>NIMDTA</b>                                                 |                    |      |                                                                                   |                    |      |
| CEX / PG Dean                                                 | ✓                  |      | <b>SPPG</b>                                                                       |                    |      |
| <b>QUB</b>                                                    |                    |      | Deputy Secretary SPPG                                                             |                    | ✓    |
| Dean of Medical School                                        |                    | ✓    | Director of Primary Care                                                          | ✓                  |      |
| Head of Nursing School                                        |                    | ✓    | Director of Hospital and Community Care                                           |                    | ✓    |
| Head of Social Work School                                    |                    | ✓    | Director of Finance & Corporate Governance                                        |                    | ✓    |
| Head of Pharmacy School                                       |                    | ✓    | Alerts Office                                                                     |                    | ✓    |
| Head of Dentistry School                                      |                    |      | Director of Performance, Safety & Service Improvement                             |                    | ✓    |
| <b>UU</b>                                                     |                    |      |                                                                                   |                    |      |
| Head of Medical School                                        |                    | ✓    | <b>Primary Care (through the Directorate of Primary Care, SPPG, DoH)</b>          |                    |      |
| Head of Nursing School                                        |                    | ✓    | GPs                                                                               | ✓                  |      |
| Head of Social Work School                                    |                    |      | GPPs via Mrs Glynis McMurtry Head of Pharmacy<br>glynis.mcmurtry@easternfsu.co.uk | ✓                  |      |
| Head of Pharmacy School                                       |                    | ✓    | Community Pharmacists                                                             | ✓                  |      |
| Head of School of Health Sciences (AHP Lead)                  |                    | ✓    | Dentists                                                                          |                    |      |
| <b>Open University</b>                                        |                    |      | Dispensing GPs                                                                    | ✓                  |      |
| Head of Nursing Branch                                        |                    | ✓    | <b>BSO</b>                                                                        |                    |      |
|                                                               |                    |      | Chief Executive                                                                   |                    |      |
| <b>Clinical Education Centre</b>                              |                    | ✓    |                                                                                   |                    |      |
| <b>NIPEC</b>                                                  |                    | ✓    | <b>DoH</b>                                                                        |                    |      |
| <b>NICPLD</b>                                                 |                    | ✓    | CMO office                                                                        |                    | ✓    |
| <b>NI Medicines Governance Team Leader for Secondary Care</b> |                    | ✓    | CNO office                                                                        |                    | ✓    |
| <b>NI Social Care Council</b>                                 |                    | ✓    | CPO office                                                                        |                    | ✓    |
| <b>Safeguarding Board NI</b>                                  |                    |      | CSSO office                                                                       |                    | ✓    |

|                                       |  |  |                                      |  |   |
|---------------------------------------|--|--|--------------------------------------|--|---|
| NICE Implementation Facilitator       |  |  | CDO office                           |  |   |
| Coroners Service for Northern Ireland |  |  | Safety, Quality and Standards Office |  | ✓ |