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Board of Pharmacy Advances Lifesaving Drug Labels

A lot of work still remains to ensure labels are accessible to Californians who do not speak English well

(Sacramento, CA) - On October 22nd, the Board of Pharmacy held a public meeting to discuss the implementation of SB 472. Passed in 2008, this law requires the Board to create a standardized, patient-centered prescription drug label by 2011. With a goal of providing medical information in a uniform, legible, and culturally appropriate manner, this is critical to the health of all Californians.

The adoption of draft regulations during Thursday's meeting marked an important milestone, advancing the draft regulations to the public comment period.

"It was good that the Board took a decisive action today and adopted draft regulations that require prescription drug labels be translated into five languages," states Marty Martinez, MPP, Policy Director for the California Pan-Ethnic Health Network. "However, with our state's linguistic diversity, we cannot afford to stop there. All Californians, regardless of the language they speak, should be able to receive written instructions about their medications that they can read and understand."

In terms of patient harm, the Institute of Medicine projects that at least 1.5 million Americans are sickened, injured, or killed each year by medication errors. For California this translates into a \$17.7 billion dollar problem affecting over 150,000 patients.

"Studies have shown that many people, including those with college degrees, misunderstand the instructions on prescription drug labels," says Alice Hm Chen, MD, MPH, Medical Director, General Medicine Clinic, San Francisco Hospital. "For an elderly patient with poor vision or someone with limited English skills, the verdict is clear: our current cluttered and confusing prescription labeling system is failing Californians. The swift implementation of SB 472 and standardization of pharmacy labels is critical step forward in addressing medication errors."

"By acting to adopt draft regulations during their October 22nd meeting, the Board has taken an important step in ensuring that there is transparency and fairness in the process," says Al Hernandez-Santana, JD, MCP, Executive Director, Latino Coalition for a Healthy California. "Now advocates need to continue to fight for stronger regulations during the public comment period."

The California Pan-Ethnic Health Network (CPEHN) works to ensure that all Californians have access to quality health care and can live healthy lives. We gather the strength of communities of color to build a united and powerful voice in health advocacy. Together, we work to evolve health care from a one-size-fits-all approach to a system that works for people from all cultural and ethnic backgrounds. For more information about CPEHN go to www.cpehn.org.