

## SAAP Policy Brief series

# Creating safe access to Valproate containing medicines in the SADC region

### April 2022

#### Stakeholders

- Media
- Consumer councils
- Epilepsy and mental health advocates
- Cultural and human rights advocacy groups

#### Background

Sodium valproate is used to treat some forms of epilepsy, bipolar disorder and occasionally to prevent migraine headaches. It is only available on prescription as capsules, tablets, a liquid or injectable. Sodium valproate is available in Southern Africa under the following different trade names such as Epilim, Epiziline, Epivulex, Torrent-Sodium Valproate, among others.

If taken during pregnancy, sodium valproate can cause problems for a baby's development, including birth defects and long term learning difficulties (such as autism). Overall it has been reported that children exposed to valproate in utero have a 1 in 10 chance of having congenital malformations and up to 4 in 10 chance of have brain and learning challenges. For this reason, sodium valproate should not be prescribed or used by women of child-bearing age (14 - 45) unless accompanied by advice for them to use birth control.

A recent newspaper article has once again highlighted the concerns around the use of sodium valproate/ valproic acid products (VP) by pregnant women and women of child-bearing age[1].

There is little documented information about the number of patients using VPs in the SADC region and the systems to assure and monitor safe access are in need of updating and modernizing.

## Policy implications

To ensure rational and safe use of sodium valproate / valproic acid containing products (VP). Research suggests the need to improve current systems of monitoring the safe prescribing, dispensing and use of VP in the SADC region. Therefore, there is need to enhance checks in the access and use of VP in women of child – bearing age ensuring they receive culturally - appropriate counselling and support at the point of prescribing and dispensing.

## Recommendations

A few practical steps to enhance safe use of VP for policy formulation:

1. Create patient awareness about VP use and what patients should know and do when such medicines are given to them. Information on adverse effects and counselling on proper contraception should be made mandatory;
2. Make contraceptive choices easily and cheaply available for young women who may choose to use them as part of the VP access programme.
3. Conduct regular training and awareness campaigns among patients and patient advocacy groups so that they understand the benefits of the treatments and safe use which does not impact on unborn children.
4. Conduct anthropological research to understand the psycho-social impact of pregnancy prevention programmes which may clash with cultural norms and expectations

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1] Sodium valproate: what are dangers of epilepsy drug for unborn babies? | Health | The Guardian

## About the Southern African Academy of Pharmacy (SAAP)

Southern African Academy of Pharmacy (SAAP) is an association of health care professionals, researchers and scholars with connections and continued interest in the SADC region. It is registered in the UK as a non-profit organization and sees to collaborate and work with regional and international agencies and companies in improving access to safe and affordable health care. SAAP involved in research, convening, advocacy, teaching and training in the region.

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