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James O. Maloy
23 Carol Street
Clifton, NJ 07014

Re: Docket No. 2003P-0531/CP1

Dear Mr. Maloy:

This responds to your citizen petition dated November 14, 2003 (Petition), regarding a then-pending proposed change to National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST) Handbook 44, "Specifications, Tolerances, and Other Technical Requirements for Weighing and Measuring Devices," to allow for the use of prescription scales with a pill-counting feature to count pills by weight. You request that the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) issue a report to NIST, the National Council on Weights and Measures (NCWM), and yourself, providing information on pill weight tolerances and/or variations caused by reformulations. You state that this report is needed to allow a proper evaluation of the danger to the public posed by the proposal to allow the dispensing of pills based on weight rather than count in pharmacies.

We have reviewed your petition and the information you submitted in your letter dated December 7, 2004. For the reasons stated below, your petition is denied. However, if we become aware that significant pill counting errors may be occurring because pills are being counted by weight, we will consider addressing the issue with NIST and the NCWM.

I. BACKGROUND

In 2003, the Western Weights and Measures Association (WWMA) submitted to the Specifications and Tolerances Committee of the NCWM a proposal to amend NIST Handbook 44, 2003 edition, to recognize prescription scales with a feature that counts pills by weight. The WWMA proposal was developed with input from prescription scale manufacturers who maintained that: (1) FDA provides a high level of regulatory oversight to ensure that prescription drug dosages are uniform, unlike other commodities sold by count based on weight; (2) pharmacists are trained professionals in search of an accurate method of dispensing pills; and (3) device technology provides greater accuracy for filling containers when counting by weight rather than by hand.¹ The Specifications and Tolerances Committee adopted a revised proposal on a counting-by-pill-weight

2003P-0531

PDN 1

¹ NCWM, Interim Report of the Committee on Specifications and Tolerances, 2003, at 10.

feature for prescription scales and sought input from FDA, the U.S. Pharmacopeia (USP), and representatives from the pharmaceutical industry.²

The NCWM adopted the proposed change to allow for pill counting based on weight in July 2003. Effective January 1, 2004, the proposal became part of NIST Handbook 44.

II. DISCUSSION

You claim that allowing the counting of pills by weight could lead to erroneous pill counts for several reasons. First, you state that although the dosage weight of pills is controlled, it is not controlled at a level that would permit using pill weight as the controlling factor for counting pills (Petition at 1-2). You state that the USP has a section on uniformity of dosage that allows for dosage weight tolerances of ± 15 percent.³ You maintain that this controverts the NCWM's assumption about the uniformity of drug dosages. Second, you question the accuracy of pill weights that are stored in the electronic memory of prescription scales. You state that scales that count by weight store in their memory a table of average pill weights, cross-referenced to NDC codes. Because drug manufacturers do not publish the weight of their pills, this information must be gathered empirically. However, you state that because a relative standard deviation of 6 percent is allowable, the stored average piece weight of a sample of 30 pills would not be accurate. Third, you contend that reformulation of pills (changing the weight of the excipients but not the active ingredients) could result in two versions of the same drug with the same NDC code but different pill weights, further complicating the counting of pills by weight. Finally, you claim that studies of pill counting by hand produced an error rate of about 0.4 percent, significantly lower than the error rate that you claim would result from counting by weight, due to the dosage weight tolerances of ± 15 percent (Petition at 2).

FDA agrees that counting and dispensing pills by weight could potentially lead to errors in pill count. We also agree that the calculation of pill weights and reformulation of pills, if not adequately addressed in pharmacy procedures, could affect pill counts. To ensure that patients receive uniform dosages of a drug product from unit to unit, FDA regulations require in-process controls for each drug product and specifications to assure each product's identity, strength, quality, purity, and bioavailability; reference to the USP or National Formulary may satisfy these requirements (21 CFR 314.50(d)(1)(ii)(a)). Under our current good manufacturing practice regulations, manufacturers must establish control procedures to monitor the output and validate the performance of manufacturing processes that may be responsible for causing variability in the characteristics of a drug product, including procedures on weight variation and content uniformity (21 CFR 211.110(a)). One of the principal ways that a manufacturer can meet these uniformity requirements is by ensuring that its drug product meets the acceptance criteria set forth in

² Id. at 12.

³ Petition at 2 (citing U.S. Pharmacopeia 24/National Formulary 19 (USP 24/NF 19), July 1, 2000, Supplement, 2094-96).

USP <905>, Uniformity of Dosage Units.⁴ This test provides for two methods to measure the uniformity of active ingredients in dosage units, weight variation and content uniformity. Generally, when the dosage unit is a liquid-filled soft capsule (other than a soft capsule containing a suspension) or when the dosage unit contains 50 milligrams or more of an active ingredient that comprises 50 percent or more, by weight, of the unit, the weight variation method can be used. This method measures the weight of individual units, and the content of active ingredient in each unit is then calculated, assuming homogeneous distribution of the active ingredient. For dosage units that do not qualify for the weight variation method, the content uniformity method can be used, involving assaying the active ingredient in individual units. The same acceptance criteria apply to both methods, i.e., the amount of the active ingredient in each of the dosage units lies within the range of 85 to 115 percent of the label claim and the relative standard deviation is less than or equal to 6 percent.

It might be reasonable to extrapolate these acceptance criteria for the uniformity of *active ingredient* to the uniformity of *pill weight* (assuming homogeneous distribution of the active ingredient). If so extrapolated, applying these wide acceptance criteria to dispensing pills by weight instead of count might potentially lead to errors in pill count. Nevertheless, we believe that the procedures and requirements in the standard for prescription scales under NIST Handbook 44, used in conjunction with appropriate pharmacy quality control practices, are sufficient to allow reliable dispensing of tablet and capsule drug products. For example, the prescription scales standard establishes a minimum number of units for which the counting should be used and a check for linearity for material weights corresponding to higher numbers of dosage units. The standard also requires a level of sensitivity during calibration such that the scale will reject one unit under or over the number of units corresponding to a certain total weight. To ensure that there is a reliable value for dose unit weight, pharmacies using pill weights for dispensing must, either at the time of receipt of a drug product or dispensing, make a determination of average weight for the product. This and other quality control procedures, along with the prescription scale standards, should ensure reliable dispensing of drug products. However, if we become aware of information suggesting that the use of prescription scales is resulting in significant pill miscounting, we will consider submitting comments to NIST and the NCWM.

You ask that FDA issue a report specifying the typical range of single-batch and batch-to-batch tolerances on pill weights based on information submitted by drug manufacturers to the Agency (Petition at 1). You also state that we could provide data on predicted counting error rates using pill weight data provided to the Agency (id. at 2).

It would not be feasible for FDA to provide the information you request. As stated above, § 211.110(a) requires manufacturers to establish control procedures to monitor the weight variation of pills and to validate the performance of the manufacturing processes that might be responsible for causing weight variation. However, pill weight variation is highly dependent on the formulation, size of the dosage unit, weight of the capsule shell,

⁴ USP 28/NF 23 (2005) at 2503-05.

manufacturing process, and equipment used in producing each drug product. Therefore, it would not be possible for us to establish "typical" single-batch or batch-to-batch pill weight tolerances that would be applicable to all drug products. Furthermore, providing information on pill weight tolerances for each individual drug product (without identifying each product) would require too many Agency resources to be feasible. For each strength and formulation of every solid oral drug product, we would have to assess all of the factors listed above that affect pill weight variation, calculate a pill weight tolerance, update the information to reflect product changes, and make this information available to the public; this burden would increase with each newly approved drug product and any subsequent modified formulations. For these reasons, we are unable to grant your requests that we issue a report on pill weight ranges and provide data on expected counting error rates based on pill weight data.

III. CONCLUSION

Because of the reasons stated above, your request that we provide a report on pill weight tolerances to NIST, the NCWM, and you is denied. Although we agree that allowing pill counting based on weight creates some potential for errors in pill counting, this potential might be reduced through pharmacy compliance with the procedures for the use of prescription scales. However, if we receive reports of frequent pill miscounting as a result of the changes to NIST Handbook 44, we will consider contacting NIST and the NCWM to express any appropriate concerns.

Sincerely,

 8.17.05

Steven K. Galson, M.D., M.P.H.
Acting Director
Center for Drug Evaluation and Research