**Levels of Heavy Metal Concentration in Wastewater from Pharmaceutical Industries in Anambra State, South-East Nigeria**

**Abstract**

Improper treatment and disposal of wastewater from pharmaceutical companies can contaminate nearby water bodies and surrounding ecosystems as a result of the release of pollutants such as heavy metals. The aim of this study is to investigate the levels of heavy metals in wastewater effluents from pharmaceutical companies in Anambra State, South-East Nigeria. Atomic Absorption Spectrometer (AAS) was used for the determination of heavy metals.Heavy metalconcentration ranged from ND (not detected) for Pb, Cr, Cd and Cu in all the samples to 3.916 ppm for Fe in Chez Resources Pharmaceutical Limited. The total concentration of heavy metals in the wastewater samples investigated is in the order Fe (12.727 ppm) > Zn (8.620 ppm) > Mn (1.925 ppm) > Co (1.194 ppm) > Ni (1.087 ppm) > Pb (ND) = Cr (ND) = Cu (ND). The study has shown that wastewater of all the studied pharmaceutical industries is free from Pb, Cr, Cd and Cu. The concentrations of Co across the sampling points are above the permissible limits recommended by United States Environmental Protection Agency (USEPA) of 0.10 ppm except in Alben Health Care Industries Ltd. Zn in all the samples is below the WHO recommended limit except in Chez Resources Pharmaceutical Ltd. Fe is above WHO limit in all the samples while Mn concentration in all the samples is below WHO limit except in Chazmax Pharmaceutical Ltd. and Ni in all the samples is above the WHO limit except in Alben Health Care Industries Ltd. Hence, there is the need for pharmaceutical and allied industries to monitor and treat their industrial effluents regularly.

**Keywords**: Wastewater, pharmaceutical companies, heavy metals, permissible limits, human health, Anambra State

**Introduction**

Water is necessary for life because it is used for drinking, bathing and other household activities (Hutton and Chase, 2017; Dinka, 2018) as well as its usefulness in industry and agriculture (Buettner 2020). Lack of potable water has become a global concern and depending on the source as reported in some literature, it may contain a wide range of contaminants and pollutants such as heavy metals, polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs), radioactive materials, herbicides, pesticides, per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS) commonly called forever chemicals etc. (Okafor et al 2022; (Syafrudin et al., 2021; Mugudamani et al., 2023; Monk et al., 2025; de Jesus et al., 2023; Alfarsi et al., 2025; Shapiro et al., 2025).

Wastewater is often characterized by its physicochemical properties, which include its pH, dissolved oxygen content, total dissolved particles, and heavy metals (Tadesse et al., 2018). To improve water quality and lessen environmental pollution, techniques for handling and treating wastewater abound. Some of these techniques include using sump pumps that clean the water or using bacteria that can withstand heavy metals. The need for clean water has increased due to global population growth and ongoing urbanization, which has also increased the amount of wastewater that needs to be treated (Bolong et al., 2009). Wastewater is assessed and methods are suggested to recover the valuable compounds to a significant degree from a variety of water-intensive industries, including bulk pharmaceuticals, related pharmaceutics, and active pharmaceutical ingredients (Gadipelly et al., 2014).

It is impossible to completely remove drugs from wastewater using a single method. According to Rostam et al. (2020), membrane reactors, advanced post-treatment methods, and traditional treatment methods appear to be the most efficacious wastewater treatment technologies. Small-scale enterprises that release their wastewater into nearby watercourses without first treating it to lessen the final discharge are the ones who cause problems with effluent treatment. This is a result of poor and improper inspections carried out by regulatory agencies. Since pharmaceutical wastewater may comprise organic solvents, catalysts, additives, reactants, intermediates, raw materials, and active pharmaceutical ingredients, handling it might be difficult (Odika et al., 2020).

Drugs can enter the water through a variety of channels, including the sewer, industrial and hospital waste, and excretion. From the point of production to the point of use or disposal, these routes span a range of times. The expansion of industrial and agricultural operations contributes to global problems such as water contamination and limited access to clean water (Wang et al., 2019).

The rate of industrial growth worldwide is increasing quickly, which is detrimental to the environment. The untreated release of contaminated wastewater into the aquatic environment is the cause of these effects. The automotive, battery, chemical, pharmaceutical, electroplating, galvanizing, coating, paint, and electronics industries are the main sources of heavy metal pollution from industrial effluent. Duruibe et al. (2007) state that arsenic, cadmium, copper, chromium, lead, mercury, nickel, and zinc are commonly found in heavy metal-contaminated wastewater.

Heavy metals are poisonous and persistent and therefore can have negative effects on both biotic and abiotic components of the ecosystem when they find their way into food chains (Okafor et al., 2023). Heavy metals have been demonstrated to have negative effects on the environment and living beings because water is a transport for pollutants (Veado et al., 2000; Goodyear and McNeill, 1999). Through watery media, the pollutants can infiltrate the biological system and over time, through processes of bioaccumulation and biomagnification, reach high concentrations (Wang et al., 2025). When heavy metal poisoning affects humans as the top consumer in the food chain and reaches a significant trophic level, health could be at risk (Jaishankar et al., 2014).

Untreated wastewater containing heavy metals from anthropogenic sources and widespread improper disposal are the causes of the presence of heavy metal contaminants in water, which is an indicator of global industrialization (UNCSD, 2010). Waterways are a common route for pollutants to move, and they can be harmful to both the environment and living creatures (Harrison, 2001).

Acute exposure to high levels of heavy metals from untreated wastewater can cause gastrointestinal abnormalities, dermatitis, anorexia, nausea, and vomiting (UNEP, 2007). It can as well lead to deficiencies in certain nutrients, Parkinson's disease, cancer, skin conditions, irregularities in the respiratory system, problems with the intestines and stomach, damage to the central nervous system, blood diseases, and infertility (Lesmana et al., 2009).

Studies on negative ecological and health effects of exposure to heavy metal contamination of water (Okafor et al., 2023; Xu et al., 2024), soil (Priya et al., 2023; Parvez et al., 2023), sediment (Okafor et al., 2024), beverage (Okafor et al., 2016; Okafor et al., 2020; Okafor et al., 2021; Okafor et al., 2022), air (Bayo Jimenez et al., 2023; Tchounwou et al., 2012) etc. have been documented. Moreover, heavy metal contamination of pharmaceutical wastewater in some parts of Nigeria and beyond has also been reported (Oladimeji et al., 2023; Shokri et al., 2016; Anyakora et al., 2011). Nonetheless, literature is scarce on the presence of heavy metals in pharmaceutical wastewater from pharmaceutical industries in Anambra State, South-East Nigeria; hence, this study.

**Materials and Methods**

**Sample Collection**

Pharmaceutical wastewater samples were collected on March 26, 2024, using previously cleaned glass bottles. At each sampling point, the bottle was rinsed twice with the wastewater to be collected. The wastewater samples were collected at five different points from each of the five pharmaceutical industries around Anambra State to give twenty-five samples. Five samples collected at each company were homogenized and transferred into amber coloured bottle. They were labeled thus: Kingsize Pharmaceutical Nig. Ltd. Obosi (A), Alben Healthcare Industries Ltd. Ogidi (B), New Divine Favour Pharmaceuticals Ltd. Nkpor (C), Chez Resources Pharmaceutical Company Ltd. Onitsha (D) and Chazmax Pharmaceutical Industries Ltd Onitsha (E). The samples were packaged and transported to the Central Laboratory of the Nigerian Institute of Oceanography and Marine Research, Victoria Island, Lagos, for heavy metal analysis.

**Heavy Metal Analysis**

The analysis required the use of high-quality analytical reagents, which were sourced from BDH Chemical Ltd in the UK and Sigma-Aldrich Chemie GmbH in Germany. To clean the glassware and sample bottles, detergents and deionized water were utilized, after which they were allowed to soak overnight in a solution of 10% HNO3 combined with 1% HCl. This was followed by rinsing with deionized water. Heavy metal analysis by Atomic Absorption Spectrophotometric technique as described some scholars (Okafor et al. 2016a; b; c; Assubaie 2015; Ipeaiyeda 2017; Okafor et al. 2022a; b) with modifications. Briefly, 10 cm3 of perchloric acid and 10 cm3 concentrated HNO3 were added to 2 cm3 of the sample in a 250 cm3 beaker. This was boiled in a fume cupboard on a hot plate until white vapours began to emerge. The digestive system was then recharged and heated until white fumes were released. The addition of 20 cm3 of deionized water was then made. The mixture was then boiled for another 20 min until it was particle-free. The digested sample was brought down and cooled to room temperature under the hood. The filtrate was collected in a 50 cm3 volumetric flask after being filtered through No. 11 Whatman filter paper. Before the combined filtrate was made up to mark and placed into a sample container, 20 cm3 of deionized water was used to rinse the filter paper. Standards were made from the salts of the metals to be analysed, and lamps for the analysis were set up. This was done for Cd, Co, Cr, Cu, Fe, Pb, Mn, Ni, and Zn. The diluents of the sample were aspirated into an Agilent AA500F Atomic Absorption Spectrophotometer. All the samples were examined in triplicate, and the metal concentrations were averaged out.

**Results and Discussion**

The results of heavy metal concentrations of water samples from some pharmaceutical industries in Anambra State are shown in Table 1. The results showed that there was no lead in any of the samples. This is within the permissible limit of 0.01 ppm set by the World Health Organization. The primary sources of lead, the majority of which eventually find their way into natural water systems, include several industrial fuels, leaded gasoline, and mining sources (Mahmud et al., 2016).

Furthermore, sample B had the lowest cobalt levels (0.063 ppm), while sample D had the highest (0.551 ppm). It was found that most of the results were greater than the United State Environmental Protection Agency (USEPA) approved effluent water limit of 0.10 ppm. One distinguishable feature of cobalt exposure-related hepatotoxicity and carcinogenesis is reversible systolic cardiac depression, which sets it apart from other cardiomyopathy disorders. Cardiomyopathy brought on by cobalt can be progressively and fatally deadly. However, survivors usually regain cardiac function (Packer, 2016). Moreover, Sample A had the lowest zinc value (0.715 ppm) and Sample D the highest (3.403 ppm).

**Table 1: Heavy Metal Concentrations of Water Samples from Some Pharmaceutical Industries in Anambra State.**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Heavy Metal Concentration (ppm)**  **Sampling Point** | **Pb** | **Co** | **Zn** | **Fe** | **Cr** | **Mn** | **Cd** | **Ni** | **Cu** |
| A (Kingsize Pharm. Nig. Ltd.) | ND | 0.112 | 0.715 | 0.979 | ND | 0.144 | ND | 0.198 | ND |
| B (Alben Healthcare Ind. Ltd.) | ND | 0.063 | 0.738 | 0.490 | ND | 0.105 | ND | 0.007 | ND |
| C (New Divine Favour Pharm. Ltd.) | ND | 0.161 | 0.950 | 3.566 | ND | 0.232 | ND | 0.239 | ND |
| D (Chez Resources Pharm. Ltd.) | ND | 0.551 | 3.403 | 3.916 | ND | 0.329 | ND | 0.363 | ND |
| E (Chazmax Pharm. Ind. Ltd.) | ND | 0.307 | 2.814 | 3.776 | ND | 0.485 | ND | 0.280 | ND |
| ∑CHMs | 0.000 | 1.194 | 8.620 | 12.727 | 0.000 | 1.295 | 0.000 | 1.087 | 0.000 |
| WHOPL | 0.01 | 0.10\* | 3.00 | 0.30 | 0.05 | 0.40 | 0.003 | 0.07 | 2.00 |

ND = Not Detectable, CHMs = Concentration of Heavy Metals, WHOPL = World Health Organization Permissible Limit, \*USEPA Permissible Limit.

This demonstrated that the result is within the acceptable or permitted range set by the WHO.

The WHO allows for a maximum of 0.005 ppm of iron, which means that all of the samples were above this limit. Too much iron has been associated with a higher risk of heart disease, gestational diabetes, and potentially fatal outcomes, in addition to oxidative stress and cellular damage (Quezada-Pinedo et al., 2021). Regardless, no chromium was detected, which is in line with the WHO's maximum allowable level of 0.05 ppm. For non-occupational human populations, the main routes of exposure are through the consumption of chromium-containing food and water or by skin contact with objects that contain chromium (Nickens et al., 2010). Additionally, the metallurgical, refractory, and chemical industries release a substantial amount of Cr into the soil, ground water, and atmosphere. This leads to health problems for humans, animals, and marine life (Fang et al., 2014).

Further analysis of the manganese concentrations revealed that sample E (0.485 ppm) had the highest concentration of the mineral, whereas sample B (0.105 ppm) had the highest concentration. According to these findings, every sample went above the allowable level. Furthermore, there was no cadmium detected, which is within the WHO's allowed level of 0.003 ppm. Cadmium is absorbed by surface runoff and industrial waste, contaminating the soil and sediments in the aquatic environment. A person may get cadmium poisoning from eating contaminated food, drinking contaminated water, or breathing in contaminated air. According to Hayat *et* *al*. (2018), cadmium has no properties that are advantageous for plant growth or metabolic activities. Additionally, samples C, D, and E had the greatest concentrations of nickel, exceeding the WHO limit by 0.219, 0.343, and 0.260, respectively. Cadmium has no qualities that are beneficial for plant growth or metabolic processes, according to Hayat et al. (2018). Furthermore, the highest quantities of nickel were found in samples C, D, and E, which exceeded the WHO limit by 0.219, 0.343, and 0.260, respectively. Nickel is a naturally occurring element with a wide range of industrial applications. According to Li et al. (2016), it reaches the atmosphere from both natural and artificial sources.

Nickel has a wide range of industrial applications and is a naturally occurring element. It is released into the atmosphere by both human and natural sources (Li et al., 2016). Due to the inhalation of contaminated air, it has numerous negative effects on humans, including allergies, lung and nasal cancer, kidney, and cardiovascular diseases (Genchi *et* *al*., 2020). Copper was likewise not found. This is in compliance with the 0.002 ppm WHO permitted level. Cu negatively affects male reproductive function, resulting in a drop-in sperm motility and count (Tvrda et al., 2015).

Nickel is a naturally occurring element with a wide range of industrial applications. Both natural and human-caused sources emit it into the atmosphere (Li et al., 2016). Humans who breathe in contaminated air are at risk for a variety of illnesses, including as allergies, kidney, lung, and nasal cancer, as well as cardiovascular problems (Genchi et al., 2020). Copper was also not discovered. This complies with the WHO-permitted threshold of 0.002 ppm. Cu negatively affects male reproductive function, resulting in a drop in sperm motility and count (Tvrda *et* *al*., 2015).

**Conclusion**

The current work has shown the absence of Pb, Cr, Cd and Cu in the wastewater of all the pharmaceutical industries investigated. Again, all the samples have higher concentrations of Fe as all the wastewater samples except for Albean Health Care Ltd.'s, exhibits elevated levels of Ni and Co. High concentrations of Zn and Mn are found in the effluent of Chez Resources Pharm. Ltd. and Chazmax Pharm. Ltd., respectively. Exposure to Ni and Co at quantities higher than the WHO-acceptable limit raises serious concerns regarding possible health hazards. Their pollution of the wastewater of Chez Resources Pharm. Ltd. and Chazmax Pharm. Ltd. constitutes health concerns that needs to be addressed promptly because of their possible carcinogenicity. In most samples, the concentration of other heavy metals was within the permitted limits. These levels did not immediately exceed regulatory guidelines; however, it is important to continue the monitoring of pharmaceutical wastewater for prompt policy formulations by regulatory bodies to ensure that they remain within acceptable ranges.

**Declaration of Interests**

The authors have declared no conflicts of interest

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