Safe disposal of unwanted or unused medications is an essential step in preventing the misuse and potential abuse of controlled substances and other medications. Some studies indicate that nearly 70 percent of opioids prescribed post-surgery are not used. Other studies note that as many as two-thirds of those using opioids non-medically obtain them from a friend or relative.

The stockpiling of unused prescriptions can create a potentially serious diversion of powerful medications. While patients and caregivers should remove unused medications from the home as soon as is practical to prevent misuse by the patient or someone in the home, proper disposal may be inconvenient, unavailable, or simply not considered.

Additionally, safe disposal is imperative because some drugs have the potential for contaminating water through waste water systems.

Options for Disposal
It is critical to address the issue of safe disposal of medications — particularly opioids and other abusable substances — in a manner that is consistent with good public health, close to home, and sustainable.

While a number of pharmacies and municipal waste disposal centers sponsor “drop off days,” these efforts tend to be fragmented and irregularly scheduled.

Some pharmacies allow customers to purchase prepaid mailers in order to return unused medicines, which is not an ideal solution.

Walgreens is beginning a new program to install safe medication disposal kiosks in more than 600 pharmacies across 45 states, including Texas. And Walmart now offers patients with an opioid prescription a powder that, when mixed with warm water, turns the pills into a biodegradable gel safe for disposal in household trash.

Recommendations
- Physicians and patients should have easy access to readily available materials to explain take-back and disposal programs — the final step in the life cycle of a partially used prescription. These materials can be placed in physician offices, clinics, and pharmacies to educate all on the safe disposal of unused prescription medications.

- All stakeholders — both prescribers and pharmacy groups — should meet and discuss ways of educating patients, developing consistent and convenient take-back efforts, and promoting the use of proper disposal of unused medications. These activities should be pursued at both state and local levels.