



National Prescribing Service Limited



MEDIA RELEASE

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Warning on advertising drugs directly to the public: the New Zealand experience and lessons for Australia

Australia must act now in order to ensure it does not make the same mistake as the USA and New Zealand in allowing advertising of prescription medicines directly to consumers. This advertising has had a negative impact, according to Professor Les Toop and Dr Dee Mangin from the Christchurch School of Medicine and Health Sciences, University of Otago, New Zealand, in the latest issue of *Australian Prescriber*.

The evidence from the New Zealand experience suggests that direct-to-consumer advertising is promotion and is clearly designed to drive choice rather than inform it. Professor Toop says, "All of this would be fine if direct-to-consumer advertising actually informed consumers, but the evidence suggests it does not".

"The recent and ongoing debacle with COX-2 inhibitors for arthritis, and the increased harm resulting from the extensive and misleading direct-to-consumer advertising in the USA, have reawakened calls for stricter regulation of drug promotion around the world."

Professor Toop says direct-to-consumer advertising resulted in people switching their medication. This caused a significant increase in costs and in the workload of general practitioners, who often had to counteract the anxiety felt by patients reacting to inaccuracies in advertising.

Following a television campaign for an inhaler to control asthma, many general practitioners were angry at being pressured to switch patients to a different inhaler. The doctors considered that this inhaler had little or no added therapeutic benefit, despite its premium price.

Direct-to-consumer advertising is a very effective marketing strategy. It is growing rapidly with more than US\$4 billion spent on direct-to-consumer advertising in the USA in 2004 and tens of millions spent annually in New Zealand. Although direct-to-consumer advertising is not currently allowed in Australia, pharmaceutical companies run 'disease awareness' campaigns for conditions that can be treated by their products.

"What both New Zealand and Australia need is greater and more accessible independent consumer health information, not impossible to regulate, industry sponsored direct-to-consumer advertising" said Professor Toop.

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