



Australian Prescriber



AN INDEPENDENT REVIEW

Alexander Building
Furzer St, PHILLIP ACT
Tel:02 6282 6755; Fax 02 6282 6855

e-mail: info@australianprescriber.com
internet: www.australianprescriber.com

Address correspondence to:
The Editor, Australian Prescriber
PO Box 100, WODEN ACT 2606

Media Release

3 August 1999

Advertising pharmaceuticals: what are effective measures?

Does advertising fulfil the needs of consumers and health professionals for independent information about pharmaceutical treatments? And is Australia's system for regulating promotional information about pharmaceuticals sufficiently rigorous?

These are the questions posed by two contributors to the latest issue of *Australian Prescriber*, Jan Donovan, consumer representative on the board of the National Prescribing Service (NPS) and Dr Elizabeth Roughead from the University of South Australia respectively.

Advertising medicines directly to the public

Advertising of prescription medicines to consumers is not permitted in Australia, yet there has been a growth in the use of these medicines. The marketing of these medicines to health professionals has contributed to this growth, but the key question remains whether or not advertising leads to improved health outcomes.

Canadian research into the promotion of over-the-counter drugs found that "The information on risks and benefits was skewed towards a misleadingly positive representation of the product."

Jan Donovan concludes that "Pharmaceutical company advertising is not independent information," but points to initiatives such as Consumer Medicines Information (CMI) as a positive example of industry, consumers and health professionals working together to provide clear and unbiased information about medicines.

Can drug companies police themselves?

Dr Roughead focuses attention on how regulation of the advertising and promotion of prescription medicines actually works.

"The messages promoting prescribing should be factual, evidence-based, unambiguous and balanced," she says.

In Australia, the Australian Pharmaceutical Manufacturers Association (APMA) Code of Conduct provides a guide for industry on how to advertise and promote prescription medicines, and current membership covers 95% of the prescription medicines industry.

The APMA Code contains standards for all types of promotional material and restricts many activities – the promotion of prescription medicines to the general public, for example. However, ensuring that promotional claims are in accord with the Code's standards relies on a complaints mechanism.

From 1 July 1997 to 30 June 1998 the APMA Code of Conduct Subcommittee evaluated 39 complaints, of which 32 were found to breach the Code.

Sanctions may include "the requirement to cease or modify the promotional practice, publishing corrective letters or retraction statements, the imposition of fines of up to \$30,000 or expulsion from the APMA."

However, when compared with promotional budgets, "these fines may not be significant." Further, the uppermost sanction - expulsion from membership of the APMA – has not yet been employed, notes Dr Roughead.

Further information: Jan Donovan (03) 9521 6808

Dr Elizabeth Roughead (08) 8302 2179

The current issue of *Australian Prescriber* also reports on stroke management and new schizophrenia medications, and provides an update on detecting Hepatitis C.

For a copy of the complete articles or information about *Australian Prescriber*,

contact (02) 6289 7038 or fax (02) 6289 8641