

MEDIA RELEASE

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Who is behind the medicines information on the internet?

Pharmaceutical companies are tapping into online social networking sites such as Facebook and MySpace and using new media forms to reach wider Australian audiences.

Writing in the latest edition of ***Australian Prescriber***, health journalist Melissa Sweet discusses how the internet is helping to globalise and change pharmaceutical marketing, and how this poses challenges for regulators.

The article gives examples of evolving marketing practices such as using overseas blogs and websites in countries where pharmaceutical marketing is less regulated than in Australia to promote and sell products.

“Safety concerns have been raised about the purchase of prescription, non-prescription and complementary medicines over the internet,” Ms Sweet writes. “Company websites can link to other sites that may not meet regulatory requirements.”

Ms Sweet claims companies are using blogs and websites to develop customer relationships which may enable companies to gather patient stories and feedback for use in positioning their products, though consumers are often not aware of their involvement.

“It is not always clear from a website name who is behind it ... and it can be extremely difficult to identify who is responsible for the content spread through [social] networks,” Ms Sweet writes.

“Drug companies are increasingly turning to electronic methods to market their products. [This] includes diverse strategies, is cheaper than traditional sales representatives and can result in a significant return on investment.

The article discusses how pharmaceutical companies are seeking to capitalise on medical social networking sites. One site earns money by letting clients such as hedge funds monitor doctors’ anonymous online conversations and thus gain insight into, say, the popularity of certain treatments.

“Apart from disseminating company-generated content, social networking sites also offer opportunities for companies to insert themselves into conversations between site users through postings and comments on blogs.”

“On the other hand, such networks are also being used for public health purposes, including promoting messages about the quality use of medicines,” Ms Sweet writes.

She acknowledges Medicines Australia’s efforts to police the promotion of medicines, but concludes that such regulation is going to become increasingly harder as technology evolves.

For a fully copy of the article visit www.australianprescriber.com.

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