

Media release**3 February 2004**

Trans-Tasman decisions on direct-to-consumer advertising

New Zealanders are increasingly being targeted by pharmaceutical companies' advertising campaigns. The effects of this practice on the health system and Quality Use of Medicines are addressed by Dr Agnes Vitry, Senior Lecturer in Pharmacotherapeutics at the University of South Australia in the latest edition of *Australian Prescriber*.

Research done in New Zealand and examined by Dr Vitry, concluded that direct-to-consumer advertising had led to increases in sales of prescription drugs. "In 2001-02 four heavily advertised drugs accounted for almost a quarter of the increase in the dispensing on the Pharmaceutical Schedule in New Zealand."

Direct-to-consumer advertising was also responsible for an increase in patient pressure to prescribe advertised medicines. Researchers reported that 69% of general practitioners surveyed had been under pressure from their patients to prescribe an advertised medicine, even when the therapeutic benefits were questionable.

On the whole, the research found pharmaceutical direct-to-consumer advertising as it exists in New Zealand "does not provide consumers with objective information of risks, benefits and options of treatment and is a serious risk to the sustainability of health systems".

New Zealand Health Minister Annette King is reportedly seeking a ban on direct-to-consumer advertising by March 2004 in order to align New Zealand policy with that of Australia, where the practice is illegal under the Therapeutic Goods Act. This move has been prompted by the signing in mid-December of a treaty between Australia and New Zealand to create a single agency regulating the registration and promotion of medicines and medical devices.

However, the adoption of a standard common to Australia may not serve as the ultimate answer for New Zealand.

In Australia pharmaceutical companies can target consumers by supporting programs and campaigns about a specific condition or disease. These campaigns may be similar to the advertisements aimed at health professionals, and may direct the public to phone lines or web sites sponsored by the companies. These approaches are not banned under the current Code of Conduct of Medicines Australia, as the advertisements do not mention the name of the products.

In *Australian Prescriber* Dr Vitry asserts that to ensure that all Australians are able to "access unbiased, accurate and comprehensive information about their treatment options", Australia needs to do more to counteract campaigns undertaken by drug companies.

Australian Prescriber is an independent review providing critical commentary on therapeutic topics for health professionals. It is published by the National Prescribing Service Limited (NPS). NPS is an independent Australian organisation for Quality Use of Medicines. For further information about the NPS visit the web site www.nps.org.au

To view the complete article visit the *Australian Prescriber* web site www.australianprescriber.com. For further information or expert commentary about this article please contact Miriam Fletcher at NPS by telephone on (02) 8217 8700 (bh) or 0419 618 365 (media mobile) or by email at mfletcher@nps.org.au.

TPAUS.02.04