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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*.

New Zealand research examined in *Australian Prescriber* shows that direct-to-consumer advertising has led to increases in sales of prescription drugs and may lead to pressure on doctors to prescribe advertised medicines, "even if they felt that these medicines offered little added benefit over drugs they would normally use".

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. 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 National Prescribing Service Limited (NPS). NPS is an independent Australian organisation for Quality Use of Medicines. For further information about NPS visit the web site www.nps.org.au

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