

**Media release****3 February 2004****Australia needs to be watchful of direct-to-consumer advertising of medicines**

Australian consumers are being targeted by pharmaceutical companies in disease awareness campaigns, despite the fact that advertising of prescription drugs to the general public is illegal, according to Dr Agnes Vitry, Senior Lecturer in Pharmacotherapeutics at the University of South Australia.

In the latest edition of *Australian Prescriber* Dr Vitry examines the effects of advertising on New Zealand's health system, where direct-to-consumer advertising is legal. Research done by experts in New Zealand concluded that direct-to-consumer advertising had led to increases in sales of prescription drugs, and patient pressure to prescribe advertised medicines, even when the therapeutic benefits were questionable.

The research found direct-to-consumer advertising 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".

In Australia, pharmaceutical companies support programs and campaigns targeting a specific condition or disease, and direct the public to phone lines or web sites for help. Despite the appeal to consumers, this approach is not banned under the current Code of Conduct of Medicines Australia, as advertisements do not refer directly to the name of the product.

Current strategies to prevent pharmaceutical companies from directly advertising medicines to consumers in Australia are inadequate. Dr Vitry asserts that in order to ensure all Australians have "access to unbiased, accurate and comprehensive information about their treatment options", Australia needs to do more to counteract campaigns undertaken by drug companies.

For the complete article visit the *Australian Prescriber* web site [www.australianprescriber.com](http://www.australianprescriber.com) *Australian Prescriber*, an independent review providing critical commentary on therapeutic topics for health professionals, is published by the National Prescribing Service (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](http://www.nps.org.au)

For independent information about medicines consumers can contact *Medicines Line* on 1300 888 763 Monday to Friday between 9am and 6pm EST for the cost of a local call. *Medicines Line* gives confidential information about prescription medicines, over-the-counter medicines, herbal and natural therapies and is provided by NPS.

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