



National Prescribing Service Limited

MEDIA RELEASE

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Fast, accessible complementary medicine information needed

GPs and pharmacists want central information resources on complementary medicines they can access through the internet or prescribing/dispensing software, according to the latest findings from research conducted by the National Prescribing Service Ltd (NPS).

Reports on the research into the information needs of consumers, GPs and pharmacists are due for public release in early December.

“We know that healthcare professionals are overloaded with information, and complementary medicine is just one small component of a large medicines industry. What this study has shown is that GPs and pharmacists want to know where they can easily access evidence-based information on complementary medicines,” NPS CEO Dr Lynn Weekes said.

“When GPs and pharmacists are with patients they don’t want to waste time having to search for information about complementary medicines. They would like a fast, one-stop location where they can find information about adverse effects, interactions with other medicines, contraindications and clinical evidence.”

The latest findings from the NPS survey are:

- GPs most frequently use trade journals such as *Medical Observer* and *Australian Doctor*, Internet searches, MIMS, colleagues and peer-reviewed medical journals for information about complementary medicines.
- Pharmacists most frequently use Internet search engines, MIMS/APPGuide, colleagues, complementary medicine textbooks, *Australian Pharmaceutical Formulary and Handbook* and the *Australian Medicines Handbook* for information about complementary medicines.
- Google is a popular means of finding information about complementary medicines on the Web, though many GPs and pharmacists attempt to screen for good quality information.
- Both groups would value a database of interactions and fact sheets about individual complementary medicines integrated in their prescribing/dispensing software or on the Internet.
- Both groups report the need for independent and unbiased information about complementary medicines.
- GPs and pharmacists commonly seek information about safety (interactions, adverse effects and contraindications), evidence of effectiveness, dose and indications for use.
- The top three complementary medicines GPs and community pharmacists report that they would like good quality information about are coenzyme Q10, glucosamine and fish oil.

* *Complementary medicines, also known as natural or alternative medicines, include herbal medicines, vitamin and mineral supplements, other nutritional supplements, traditional medicines such as Ayurvedic medicines and traditional Chinese medicines, homoeopathic medicines, and aromatherapy oils (where they make therapeutic claims).*

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Background information

This NPS research evolved following a series of regulatory changes to the framework of complementary medicine in Australia.

The Office for Complementary Medicines was established in 1999 within the Therapeutic Goods Administration (TGA) and it created a world first regulatory framework for complementary medicines. In 2003, the Expert Committee on Complementary Medicines in the Health System was commissioned to report on the status of complementary medicines and therapies in Australia. In the report 'Complementary Medicines in the Australian Health System', the Expert Committee identified a number of concerns and made a series of recommendations to facilitate safe, appropriate and effective use of complementary medicines.

The Committee identified the need for consumers and health professionals to have 'accurate, reliable and independent information' about complementary medicines and to have appropriate skills to 'interpret available information' and 'discriminate between reliable and unreliable information' to allow them to make informed decisions about the use of complementary medicines. The lack of research about consumer and health professional complementary medicines information needs and skills was also identified in the report.

Recommendation 25 in the report suggested that "the Department of Health and Ageing commission a study to determine the complementary medicines information and skills needs of healthcare professionals and consumers, options for conveying this information to stakeholders, and the costs and resources necessary to meet these needs". The research conducted by NPS goes some way to addressing this recommendation.

Research methods

A number of research methods have been used in this study. Preliminary research was conducted in 2005 and 2006 and drew on a range of sources and activities, such as:

- A review of relevant literature from common health and medicine databases
- Qualitative research with consumers suffering from a chronic condition
- A review of calls to NPS medicines information telephone services
- Inclusion of questions on complementary medicines in NPS surveys
- Telephone surveys
- A review of data from the Bettering the Evaluation and Care of Health (BEACH) Project and IMS wholesale data on CM sales in 2005 provided by the Complementary Healthcare Council
- Two Supplementary Analyses of Nominated Data (SAND) studies.

The consumer research consisted of a cross-sectional computer-assisted telephone survey conducted in mid 2007 and in-depth interviews with users of complementary medicines across Australia.

Health professional research focused on GPs and community pharmacists. Mail surveys and focus groups were carried out between March and September 2008.

A review of complementary medicines information sources and fact sheets was carried out between June and November 2008.

The National Prescribing Service Limited (NPS) is an independent, non-profit organisation for Quality Use of Medicines funded by the Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing.