



National Prescribing Service Limited

MEDIA RELEASE

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NPS recommendations on natural, alternative and complementary medicine information

Recommendations have been made to Government following research conducted by the National Prescribing Service Ltd (NPS) into the complementary medicine* information needs and uses of consumers, GPs and pharmacists.

In the final reports released today, NPS suggested a series of strategies and activities to ensure Australians are using complementary medicines safely and effectively.

Preliminary findings from the research showed consumers do not have ready access to adequate information about complementary medicines to inform their decision making. It was also revealed that many people do not tell their GP or pharmacist when they are taking complementary medicines; and consumers, GPs and pharmacists cannot easily find independent and accurate information about complementary medicines.

“This research has provided us with a solid base to explore options for further work to improve the quality use of complementary medicines,” NPS CEO, Dr Lynn Weekes said.

“Complementary medicine use is increasing in Australia as people are taking more responsibility for their health and turning to preventative measures. It is therefore vital that the average person has access to accurate information resources so they can make informed decisions about their health.”

Recommendations based on the NPS research include:

- Ensuring healthcare professionals have access to independent, regularly updated and evidence-based resources on the Internet, in clinical software, phone advisory services and in paper format.
- Including complementary medicines in the drug lists and prompts in computerised prescribing systems and dispensing systems to allow for easy inclusion in patient records.
- Further research into how complementary medicines interact with conventional medicines, and how to ensure that consumers balance the risks and harms of both types of medicine.
- Regular articles on the benefits and safety of complementary medicines in professional journals and the inclusion of complementary medicines learning modules in professional development programs.
- Developing and incorporating complementary medicines curricula in undergraduate, postgraduate and continuing education for pharmacists and GPs.

The reports, which have been sent to the Department of Health and Ageing, conclude that any initiatives should focus on areas where the risks and benefits of complementary medicine use are greatest, and should involve a coalition of relevant stakeholders.

“We know consumers seek advice and purchase complementary medicines from a range of health workers including pharmacy assistants, health food store workers, naturopaths and other complementary, natural and alternative medicine practitioners. NPS hopes to be involved in further research to enable us to understand the information needs of these groups,” Dr Weekes said.

To view the reports go to

www.nps.org.au/research_and_evaluation/research/current_research/complementary_medicines

** 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.