

## Background

Approximately 67% of Australians used complementary medicines (CMs) in the past year.<sup>1</sup> A recent survey of general practitioners (GPs) in Queensland showed:

- Very few perceived they have an adequate understanding of CMs.
- Most expressed a need for a CM information resource.<sup>2</sup>

The combination of high CM usage by consumers and GPs lack of understanding about CMs creates a predicament for the quality use of CMs in Australia.

## Objectives

- To investigate the current practice of GPs for sourcing and using information on CMs.
- To determine the information needs and preferences of GPs regarding CMs.

## Methods

- The questionnaire was developed in conjunction with practicing GPs and a CM advisory group.
- Surveys were piloted with practicing GPs.
- A random sample of 4,032 GPs were mailed the survey in March 2008 and were asked to complete if they practiced at least one day per week.
- Reminder postcards sent on March 28 and surveys re-sent to non-responders on April 21.

Questions focussed on the following areas about CMs:

- Attitudes
- Current practice around CMs
- How GPs currently access information
- What GPs want to know
- How GPs want to access information

Analysis was conducted using SPSS 15 for Windows on preliminary data of 490 surveys returned on or before April 4 (12.2% response rate).

## Results

### Respondent characteristics

Table 1 shows the respondent characteristics, demographic aspects are similar to active GPs in Australia except that females and Australian graduates are over represented.<sup>3</sup>

Table 1: Characteristics of GPs who completed questionnaires (n=490)

Respondent characteristics	%
Gender (male)	51.4
Age range (years):	
29–34	4.8
35–44	21.6
45–54	38.7
55–64	23.3
≥ 65	11.7
Type of practice:	
Solo	11.3
2+ GPs	88.7
Patients seen per week	Median: 100
Distribution by geographic area:	
Metropolitan	68.7
Rural	29.6
Remote	1.8
Training in Australia	79.8
Postgraduate training in CM	4.6
Practice a complementary therapy (e.g. acupuncture)	13.3
Practice Integrative Medicine	29.4
Personal CM use in last 12 months (frequently/sometimes)	36.4
Recommend CMs to patients in last 12 months (frequently/sometimes)	50.1

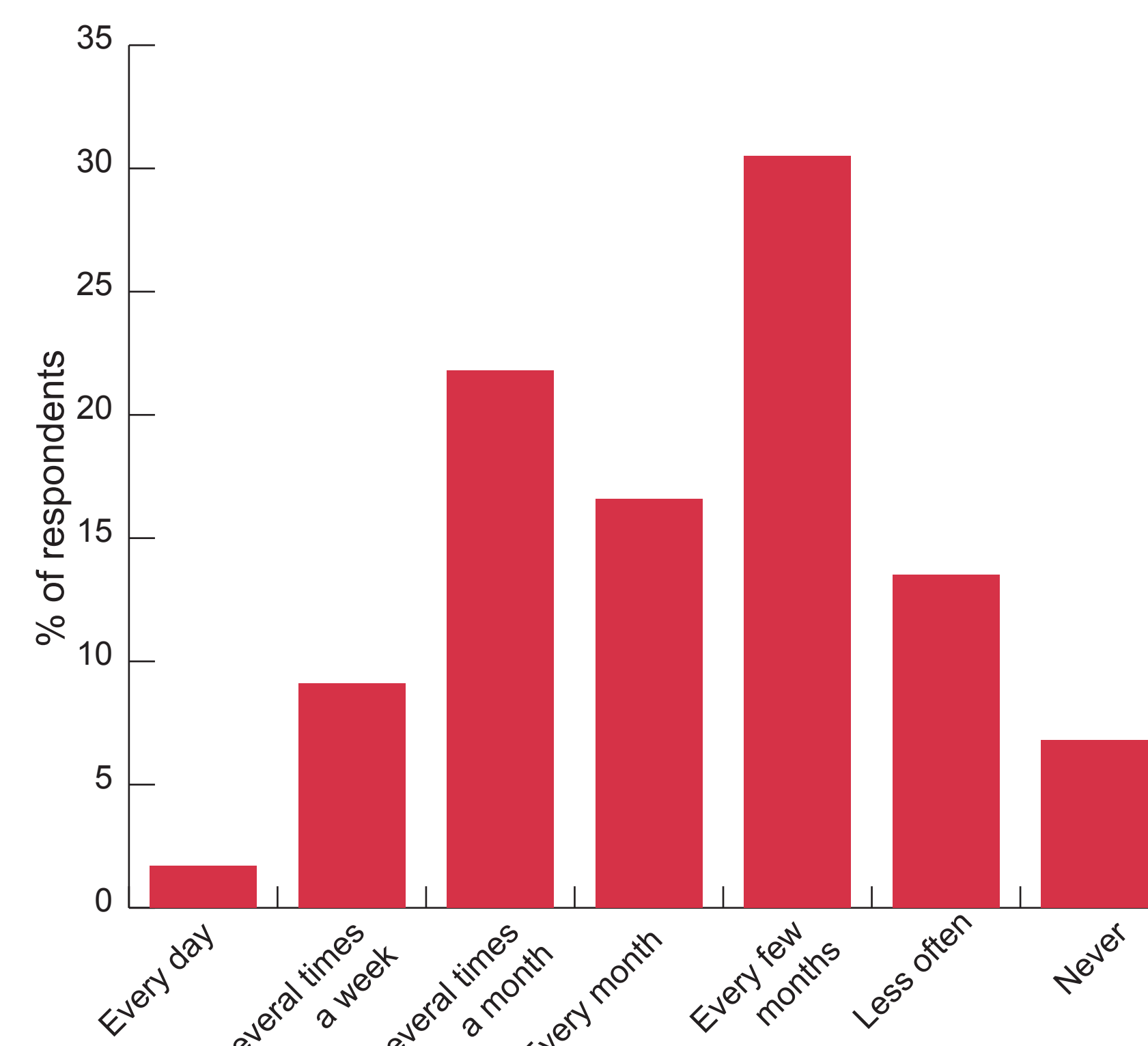
### Attitudes and current practice

- GPs were evenly split on their confidence to discuss CMs with patients, with 37.2% expressing they were confident.
- 15.7% of GPs indicated that CMs were safe and have very few side effects.
- Situations where GPs discuss CMs with patients:
  - 53.5% have initiated discussion about CMs.
  - 69.8% have when the patient requests a CM.
  - 91.8% have when the patient tells the GP they are taking a CM.
  - 1.2% never discuss CMs.

### Current information seeking behaviour

- 65.5% of GPs used the Internet for CM information in the past 12 months.
- The majority of GPs needed to look for CM information every few months or less (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Frequency of needing CM information in past 12 months



- GPs most often sought information about the safety and evidence for effectiveness of CMs. See Table 2 for details.

Table 2: Information required in past 12 months about CMs

Information required on CMs	%
Drug interactions	80.8
Adverse effects	76.5
Contraindications	63.5
Evidence for effectiveness	63.5
Indication for use	53.3
Dose	52.4
Use in pregnancy	41.8
Patient information	29.2
Use in children	22.0
Product selection	12.9
Other	3.9

- Information about GPs usage of current CM information resources is shown in Table 3. Of those that used each resource, GPs rated the most useful were CM textbooks, specific web sites, Internet search, CM journals and drug information phone services.

Table 3: Usage and usefulness of currently available CM information resources

	Used (%)	Moderately to very useful (% of those who have used)
Medical Observer, Australian Doctor	63.9	38.7
MIMS/APPGuide	58.2	18.2
Internet search	57.1	51.8
Peer-reviewed medical journal	55.1	42.2
Colleagues	45.5	36.3
Professional seminars/conferences	43.3	42.9
AMH	34.5	29
Specific web sites	31.8	59
CM journal	30.8	51.7
Prescribing software	29.4	18.8
CM textbook	21	68.9
CM industry materials	18	36.4
Drug information phone services	12	47.5
CM industry representatives	9.4	28.3

Note: The top 5 preferences are highlighted in red.

### Preferences for CM information

- The top 6 CMs that GPs desired good information on were: fish oil (71.4%), glucosamine (67.3%), coenzyme Q10 (53.9%), St John's wort (52.2%), ginkgo biloba (51.4%) and black cohosh (50.4%).
- Tables 4 and 5 show the preferences of GPs in accessing CM information. In the context of immediate need for CM information, such as answering a clinical question when a patient is present, the Internet and paper-based resources were shown to be the most popular medium.
- GPs also preferred brief fact sheets on CMs, available via hard copy, the Internet and clinical software.

Table 4: Preferences of GPs of accessing CM information if they have an immediate need

Types of information	Preferred ways to access information					
	Paper version	Clinical software	CD	Email	Internet	Telephone service
Brief updates and news	27.8	7.8	1.6	15.9	19.6	N/A
Answers to specific questions	N/A	N/A	N/A	13.1	29.4	18.4
Brief fact sheets on specific CMs	38.4	25.5	5.1	2.9	31.2	N/A
Compendium of detailed information	29.4	18.4	7.8	N/A	23.7	N/A
Database of interactions	17.3	30.6	5.1	N/A	29.2	N/A

Note: Preferences indicated by >20% of GPs are highlighted in red.

- GPs preferred professional development activities about CMs to occur via attending seminars or workshops in person, reading journals (particularly peer-reviewed medical type) and learning modules via the Internet.

Table 5: GP preferences for learning about CMs as part of professional development

Information sources	Preferred ways to access professional development					
	Attend in person	Paper version	CD	Email	Internet	Clinical software
Seminars	58.6	N/A	8.8	N/A	8	N/A
Workshops	51	N/A	N/A	N/A	7.6	N/A
Learning modules	N/A	14.1	10	1.6	23.1	5.9
Peer-reviewed medical journals	N/A	49.8	6.1	N/A	11.4	N/A
Complementary medicine journals	N/A	29.4	2.7	N/A	4.9	N/A
Trade/professional journals	N/A	23.3	3.5	N/A	4.7	N/A
Clinical audits	N/A	15.1	2.2	0.8	6.3	2.9
Case studies	N/A	17.6	5.7	1	9.8	2.4

Note: Preferences indicated by >20% of GPs are highlighted in red.

## Conclusions

- Preliminary results have been presented which show trends of current practice, CM information desired and ways of accessing this information.
- CM information should address the concerns of GPs about the safety and effectiveness of CMs.
- Any future initiatives to provide GPs with information on CMs should take into account their needs and preferences as shown.
- Further analysis of the data will be undertaken with the complete dataset to explore any associations between respondent characteristics and their needs and preferences.
- Readers should note that this is a preliminary data analysis and that those more interested and involved in CMs are more likely to return the questionnaires early.

### Further research

Further research will be undertaken in the form of focus groups to investigate reasons and barriers in accessing CM information.

### References

1. National Prescribing Service. National consumer survey 2006: final report. Sydney: National Prescribing Service, 2006.
2. Janamian T, et al. Personal communication. 26 April 2006.
3. Primary Care Division of the Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing. Reported in Britt H et al. 2008. General practice activity in Australia 2006–07. General practice series no. 21. Canberra: Australian Institute of Health and Welfare.