

## EDITORIAL

# Changes at *Australian Prescriber*

### *The Executive Editorial Board*

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The Executive Editorial Board of *Australian Prescriber* wants to alert readers to a significant change for the journal. If handled incorrectly this imposed change may threaten the journal's existence.

When you publish an independent drug bulletin, you expect to attract criticism from a range of sources, including the pharmaceutical industry. It can therefore be difficult to find a 'home' that both promotes the journal's primary role of publishing independent information, and insulates it from attack.

*Australian Prescriber* started life in 1975 in the Department of Health, within what is now the Drug Safety and Evaluation Branch of the Therapeutic Goods Administration (TGA). Publication has been continuous except for a period from 1982 to 1983 when it was halted as an economy measure. This resulted in a national and international outcry which quickly led to the journal's revival. The Department transferred *Australian Prescriber* from the TGA to the Pharmaceutical Benefits Branch in 1993, partly due to pressure from the pharmaceutical industry. In 2001, following the shake-up of the Pharmaceutical Benefits Advisory Committee, the funding of *Australian Prescriber* became the responsibility of the Pharmaceutical Access and Quality Branch of the Department of Health and Aged Care.

Despite these upheavals, *Australian Prescriber* continues to be a valued source of independent therapeutic information. This presumably reflects the fact that the Department has never interfered with the editorial process, which remains firmly in the control of the Executive Editorial Board of practising clinicians.

The circulation of the journal, which is sent to all practising and student doctors, pharmacists and dentists in Australia, is the largest of any medical journal in Australia. The extraordinary success of the electronic version of the journal is attested to by the large number of visitors to the *Australian Prescriber* web site (200 000 hits per month). This is no doubt because the public funding of *Australian Prescriber* enables it to be one of the few journals that makes its full text freely available on the internet. Readership surveys have also attested to the popularity of the journal, with the new drugs section being particularly valued by the readers.

Given the success of *Australian Prescriber* it is surprising that the Department has outsourced the journal to the National Prescribing Service (NPS) on a short-term contract. This change was not sought by the NPS, and is not consistent with the recommendations of a departmental review carried out under the supervision of the Pharmaceutical Health and Rational use of Medicines (PHARM) committee. The Executive Editorial Board was not consulted until well after the outsourcing decision had been made. No particularly cogent

reason for the transfer has ever been given to the Board. The cost of *Australian Prescriber* should not be a concern as it is, of course, minute when compared with the \$3.8 billion annual cost of the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme.

Although the Executive Editorial Board was not consulted it did not immediately reject the proposal. If the focus of the change is to promote the quality use of medicines the transfer could be beneficial. However, if the focus is on cost cutting and making it easier to cease funding the journal when the outsourcing contract expires, the move could lead to the demise of *Australian Prescriber*.

The Executive Editorial Board is committed to ensuring that:

- sufficient funding is allocated to the NPS to allow *Australian Prescriber* to continue to be published at least as frequently and with the same size and quality as at present
- *Australian Prescriber* continues to be sent free of charge to all practising and student doctors, pharmacists and dentists in Australia
- formal arrangements are made between the Department and the NPS to allow continuing access to resources of information currently available to *Australian Prescriber* by virtue of it being housed within the Department
- negotiations occur with the current editorial staff to ensure the editorial continuity essential for a journal such as *Australian Prescriber*.

The Executive Editorial Board is determined to defend *Australian Prescriber* and the international reputation it has developed over 26 years. We will have no hesitation in challenging the Department and the NPS over any issues we think have not been addressed, until they are satisfactorily resolved for the benefit of our readers.

### In this issue...

This issue is larger than planned as the Executive Editorial Board wanted to inform readers of its concerns for the journal. The members of the Editorial Board have also invited Andrew Herxheimer to explain the importance of independent drug bulletins.

While the future of the journal is uncertain we can be sure that patients will be enquiring about influenza immunisation in the next few months. Robert Hall analyses some of the evidence supporting the use of the vaccine. Allan Molloy also tells us there is little evidence for using pethidine to treat chronic pain.

We can also be certain that patients will forget to take their medication. Andy Gilbert, Libby Roughead and Lloyd Sansom tell us about some of the strategies which can be used to manage this problem.