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ASMI conference brings self care to life

Use of next-generation online health information services, improved health literacy, and increased access to medicines were the key points of discussion at the 2010 ASMI Annual Conference in Sydney last week.

Titled, "*Bringing Self Care to Life*", the conference attracted around 300 delegates and saw a line-up of Australian and international speakers traverse the critical issues shaping the consumer healthcare sector.

The increasing sophistication and take-up of online health services was a central theme addressed by Bob Gann, the Head of Strategy & Engagement for NHS Choices, the online 'front door' to the United Kingdom National Health Service (NHS).

The roll-out of the service in the UK has ushered in a revolution in the way that patients research and address health issues that impact themselves and their families. Established in 1998, the service caters to some 9 million telephone callers and 5 million online inquiries annually, through more than 3,000 trained staff across England.

With a staggering 80,000 pages of online health content, the service is transforming the entire approach to e-health in the UK, and helping to ease the overwhelming burden that was being placed on GPs dealing with minor ailments.

The challenge of duplicating a similar service in Australia was highlighted by Julian Henderson, CEO of the National Health Call Centre Network, which runs Healthdirect Australia, a free, 24/7 telephone-based nurse triage and health information service. Established in 2007, the network is jointly funded by the Commonwealth and States. But with resources and funding at just a fraction of its UK counterpart, Healthdirect Australia operates on a smaller scale.

Some 30 staff across Australia dealt with almost 190,000 calls during the September quarter alone, 75% of whom were female, and most in the 30-34 age group. What is clear is that Healthdirect, and its web-based sister, *HealthInsite*, have the capacity to become a fully-fledged e-health network.

The opportunity for innovative approaches to consumer health built upon digital technologies was covered by Ross McDonald, the Head of Retail & Consumer Goods, Google Australia & New Zealand. He quantified the magnitude of health inquiries that individuals direct to the world's

largest online search engine, and the way that this information is being utilised to benefit public health.

A little-known feature of the thousands of health inquiries directed through Google is that these searches reveal a geographic pattern that can identify health conditions and even emerging diseases. As an example, Google has been able to use the sheer volume of inquiries about flu to accurately predict new outbreaks, and has been able to work with health authorities to mobilise resources to priority areas of the country.

One of the world's leading experts on men's health, Professor Ian Banks, President of the European Men's Health Forum outlined the latest measures being advanced in the UK to address the disproportionate mortality suffered by men for treatable conditions. He said that gender and class are emerging as key determinants of health, and that specific strategies are necessary in order to reach men, and to encourage them to have health problems diagnosed and treated.

The focus on primary health was pursued by Dr Tony Hobbs, a key adviser to the Federal Government on preventative health. He urged greater cooperation between GPs and pharmacists to address the burden of minor ailments and to provide improved health outcomes. He said that GPs could improve the take-up for self care through improved education, better mentoring and telephone support, use of patient-centred support tools, and multidisciplinary teams.

Dr Lesley Braun, Senior Research Fellow, Monash University, and Research Pharmacist at Alfred Hospital Melbourne, urged greater use of complementary and integrative medicine in the mainstream health system. She said consumers want greater information on complementary medicines (CM) including access to specialists in community pharmacies. An increasing number of consumers are selecting CMs without assistance, most think they are effective, and few are experiencing adverse reactions.

One of the most enlivening parts of the conference was the Key Stakeholder Panel, which tackled the issue: The case for and against advertising of non-prescription medicines. Moderated by the ABC Radio National *The Health Report* presenter, Dr Norman Swan, the panel featured Carol Bennett of the Consumers Health Forum (CHF); Bill Curtis of advertising agency, CJB; Natalie Gauld of Pharma Projects; Nicholas Hall of Nicholas Hall & Company (UK); and Brendan O'Loughlin of Pharmacy4U.

The pharmaceutical industry representatives on the panel were highly critical of the current restrictions which prevent certain Schedule 3 (Pharmacist-only) medicines from being advertised direct to consumers, describing the category as a "graveyard".

Because these medicines can't be advertised and must be kept within the dispensary, consumers can be completely unaware of their existence. And with no mechanism to expose consumers to the brand, many consumers do not find a need to speak to the pharmacist.

Carol Bennett argued that the overriding consideration was whether the medicines will contribute to improved public health, and that advertising by itself, did not guarantee improved consumer education. She highlighted two examples where advertising had been proven beneficial – anti-sedating antihistamines, and smoking cessation products.

Bill Curtis and Nicholas Hall, on the other hand argued that since the products are sufficiently safe to be sold without prescription, they should be able to be responsibly advertised. Opening up the category to advertising would also prompt consumers to undertake further inquiry and help to encourage health literacy.

Brendan O’Loughlin pointed out that if all S3 products were able to be advertised, then pseudoephedrine may be a product that would have to be pushed into the S4 category. ASMI Executive Director, Dr Deon Schoombie raised the possibility of effectively reversing the advertising rules, so that products would be able to be advertised unless the regulatory authority could demonstrate it was not in the public interest.

In a separate session, Nicholas Hall presented latest research findings on the trends in the over-the-counter (OTC) sector, outlining the substantial benefits accruing to consumers and taxpayers, resulting from prescription-to-OTC switches around the world.

He predicted that the most promising new areas for “switch” would be in treatments for flu, oral contraceptive, erectile dysfunction, and chronic pain relief. He cautioned sponsors on the importance of good preparation ahead of a switch - building a public health case, consulting the regulatory authorities early, switching the patients along with the molecule, and recognising the power of doctors and healthcare providers in the switch campaign.