

MEDIA STATEMENT

Statement from Juliet Seifert, Executive Director, Australian Self-Medication Industry in response to an article by Emeritus Professor John Dwyer in the Sydney Morning Herald, 25 January 2006

If one is to believe Professor Dwyer, possibly millions of Australians are pursuing entirely misguided approaches to managing their health by ignoring ‘evidence-based medicine’.

In his article (Serving up nonsense in the form of pick-me-up pills) he collectively maligns a whole range of alternative health care providers and practices including homeopaths, masseurs, naturopaths and the use of vitamin supplements as ‘nonsense techniques’.

In spite of the high quality of health care available for the most part through the established medical system, many Australians have turned to complementary medicines as a means of both treating illness and maintaining good health.

For Professor Dwyer, the local GP and the existing hospital system may be entirely adequate but millions of Australians have voted with their feet to adopt elements of complementary medicine as part of an integrated strategy of preventative health.

Recent studies have shown the majority of complementary medicine users in Australia are highly educated and approach the use of such products and services in combination with existing orthodox treatments, seeking the best of both worlds. It is unnecessarily paternalistic to imply these consumers are being deceived or are incapable of making educated and informed choices based on what works best for them.

He also accuses manufacturers of some complementary medicines of intentionally misleading consumers.

Unfortunately Professor Dwyer’s comments reflect a lack of understanding of the regulatory system and advertising controls for complementary medicines in Australia. They also misrepresent the growing weight of evidence for many complementary therapies being published daily within peer-reviewed scientific journals. Even more disturbing are his suggestions that the general public are not informed or capable of making their own informed choices with regard to their personal healthcare.

He plays down the benefits of vitamin and mineral supplements on the basis that vitamin deficiency in Australia is rare. Yet this ignores the fact that Australia is not a homogenous population with uniform education and access to best nutritional choices.

Australia is facing an obesity crisis with its foundations in poor dietary choices that can lead to deficiencies in nutritional intake. The foundation for chronic diseases is already apparent in certain populations which are facing the long-term debilitating effects of osteoporosis, one of the key priority areas for national health policy.

Osteoporosis can often be assisted through supplemental intake of key vitamins and minerals like calcium and vitamin D.

Advertising controls for complementary medicines, as for all non-prescription medicine, are not based on self-imposed standards but regulated under the jurisdiction of the Therapeutic Goods Advertising Code, which includes formal advertising complaints review by an independent panel of representatives including consumer advocates, pharmacists and other health professionals.

Professor Dwyer's assertion that the Therapeutic Goods Administration (TGA) seldom prosecutes does not take into account that regulatory action does not involve prosecution in a court of law.

If the panel upheld a complaint and the company responsible for marketing a product ignored the judgement and continued to use misleading advertising, the TGA can then cancel the licence for the product making it illegal to sell.

Far from the 'toothless tiger' he asserts, Australia has a sophisticated and effective regulatory mechanism that permits consumer and health professional response to any product or advertising that may breach the standards.

About ASMI: The Australian Self-Medication Industry (ASMI) is the peak industry body for the Australian self-care industry representing consumer healthcare products including over-the-counter medicines and complementary medicines. ASMI's mission is to promote better health through responsible self-care. This means ensuring that safe and effective self-care products are readily available to all Australians at a reasonable cost. ASMI works to encourage responsible use by consumers and an increasing role for cost-effective self-medication products as part of the broad national health strategy. www.asmi.com.au