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MEDIA RELEASE

Impact of 'coughs and colds' imposing heavy burden on overstretched GP services, study finds

New research into the impact of minor ailments on general practitioner (GP) workload shows that the resources devoted to coughs, colds and other minor ailments could free-up the equivalent of 1,000 full time GPs to treat more serious health problems.

The study also identifies some \$260 million in 'waste and resource misallocation' as a result of Medicare benefits associated with GP treatment of minor ailments.

The study commissioned by the Australian Self Medication Industry (ASMI) and conducted by health economist David Gadiel says that by shifting treatment of some minor ailments to pharmacies, between 500 and 1,000 full time equivalent GPs could become available, equal to between 3% and 7% of the Australia-wide full time equivalent GP workforce.

The study is based on only the ten most frequently treated minor ailments which account for 58% of all GP attendances attracting Medicare benefit for minor ailments, and which represented some 15 million GP consultations in 2007-08.

It builds on earlier work by international health industry consultants, IMS, showing that 21% of all GP consultations involve the treatment of minor ailments, equivalent to 25 million GP consultations in 2007/08, or approximately 70,000 each day.

The Executive Director of ASMI, Juliet Seifert said the findings demonstrate the significant national health benefits that could accrue through better use of GP time and expanded self care in pharmacies.

"In the face of a severe national shortage of GPs, it makes sense to look at the benefits from moving some minor ailments away from overstretched GPs and into pharmacies, allowing GPs to concentrate on more urgent primary care needs.

"This would free-up GP time, make more appropriate use of pharmacists' skills and better use of our national health workforce," Ms Seifert said.

The most common minor ailments identified in the study were acute upper respiratory tract infection, back pain, diarrhoea and gastroenteritis, joint pain, coughs, viral infection, malaise and fatigue, headache and constipation.

Approximately half of all patients presenting at a GP for the 10 most frequently treated minor ailments were also treated with a prescription.

In fact, many minor ailments are suited to responsible self care or consultation with a pharmacist, as are some routine procedures such as refilling of prescriptions.

“There is a real need to examine alternatives to costly GP consultations for minor ailments and other conditions that can be more effectively managed once diagnosed.

“There is a role for Government through literacy programs to enable consumers to better understand the options available to those with minor ailments, as well as a need for resources to help GPs inform patients who present with such conditions,” Ms Seifert said.

Acting President of the Pharmaceutical Society of Australia, Mr Grant Kardachi, said the Pharmacy Self Care program, which specifically targets many preventive health care issues and works to improve health literacy, should be recognised as a pillar in the Government’s preventive health-care strategy.

“We have the infrastructure and expertise in place. The Government doesn’t have to reinvent the wheel. The groundwork has been laid and the PSA is ready to work with the Government to ensure its preventative care strategy is successful.”

“PSA supports the Quality use of Medicines, which enhances access to appropriate medication and delivers cost-effective health outcomes,” Mr Kardachi said.

Ms Seifert said the best use of scarce health resources would suggest a shift to pharmacy as the first point of call for minor ailments.

“It would allow doctors to apply their skills and training to best use in treating more serious conditions as well as to longer term preventative health,” Ms Seifert said.

The original IMS research was based on the Australian Medical Index (AMI) database containing de-identified GP patient records, encompassing data from more than 182,000 patients, 1,020 doctors from around Australia and almost 280,000 consultations.

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

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