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MEDIA STATEMENT

Industry and pharmacists call for minor ailments strategy to help ease doctor shortage

The non-prescription medicines industry today joined national pharmacy organizations to urge the Federal Government to do more to address GP shortages through a scheme that would see some minor ailments redirected to pharmacists.

The Executive Director of the Australian Self-Medication Industry (ASMI), Juliet Seifert said that the Government's announcement of additional GP training places was very welcome, but would not see more doctors actually available for a number of years.

The GP shortage could be addressed in a more timely way through a program that encourages patients with minor ailments to visit their pharmacist as a first port of call. It is supported by the peak professional organizations representing pharmacists.

Kos Sclavos, National President of the Pharmacy Guild: "ASMI is right. At a time when the Government is intent on getting maximum value for the dollars taxpayers put into the health system, it makes sense to utilise the skills and knowledge of Australia's most accessible health professionals in 5,000 community pharmacies."

Warwick Plunkett, National President of Pharmaceutical Society of Australia said: "The treatment of minor ailments in pharmacies provides better health outcomes for patients and frees up GPs' time to treat more serious illnesses and complaints.

"Pharmacists have the expertise and accessibility to treat minor ailments and are highly trained so they know when a patient should be referred to their doctor. It is estimated that GPs in Australia face 25 million consultations annually for minor ailments and directing many of these ailments to community pharmacists will enable GPs to focus more on serious ailments."

Recent work undertaken by ASMI shows that the GP 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.¹

"A program of self care in pharmacies could make serious inroads into the current shortage of GPs across the country and could produce results in a relatively short period of time," Ms Seifert said.

“There is also some \$260 million in ‘waste and resource misallocation’ as a result of Medicare benefits associated with GP treatment of minor ailments,” she said.

The study was 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 the face of a severe national shortage of GPs, it makes sense to look at what people can do to take greater personal responsibility for their health through improved diet, exercise and self care of minor ailments.

“By moving some of the most common minor ailments away from overstretched GPs and into pharmacies, we would enable GPs to concentrate on more urgent primary care needs”.

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.

“Additional GP places are much-needed but we also need to look at how we can address the unsustainable demand for health services that threatens to outstrip future GP capacity, and overrun health budgets,” Ms Seifert said.

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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ⁱ Gadiel D L. The Potential Economic Impact of Expanded Access to Self-medication in Australia, for the Australian Self-Medication Industry, www.asmi.com.au August 2009