

Following the Review's Alice Springs Forum I have decided to formally lodge a submission on issues that I raised at the forum. Issues about which I feel uneasy. Because of my uneasiness I believe that there is an ethical consideration at play here.

Firstly, I raised my concern that the forum discussion at the time was concentrating on the provision of pharmaceuticals and medical supplies to those with acute or chronic conditions in remote regional centres and very remote indigenous communities a highly desirable and incontestably good outcome for the community and individuals involved which casts pharmacies in a very positive light.

The conversation seemed to be neglecting issues related to people without such conditions who utilise pharmacies relatively infrequently and very real issues about the conduct of pharmacy business in the shops that are based in towns like Alice Springs, where there are 3 pharmacies and 2 major supermarkets within easy walking distance of each other. It is this everyday use of the pharmacy as both a pharma retail outlet and one for associated goods, that are marketed in the same environment and to which the same degree of customer trust is attached, that is of concern and needs to be openly and transparently considered and addressed.

The CBD pharmacies here have differentiated - one is branded by a major chain, another as a 'cut price/wholesale' operation and the third as the 'local' pharmacy. I am not certain about ownership of the businesses, but have been told there is some cross ownership of at least 2. I do not know this is the case, but if it is raises its own issues that could be thought of as market manipulation.

Secondly, and not an unconnected issue, I raised a concern about the marketing of supplements in pharmacies that can be interpreted as cross selling or even up selling products to prescription holders who must come to one of the three to have the prescription filled - effectively a captive audience/client.

As a member of National Seniors Australia (NSA) and a member of its NT Policy Advisory Group I have raised concerns with NSA about the marketing of supplements to our members through a commercial agreement with one manufacturer. Because of this concern I researched the efficacy of supplements and have come to the conclusion that for most people most supplements produce no advantage or discernible affect. Particularly, if one or more are necessary for an individual a suitably qualified person, with a full knowledge of that individual's health context and needs, should recommend and oversee its use.

For people with defined incomes, as most retired people have, expending significant amounts of that income on a product or products that provide little or no benefit is undesirable.

A personal experience

Recently I visited a local pharmacy to fill a prescription for a well-known cholesterol lowering drug that I have been taking for more than a decade. For the first time ever in a pharmacy I was asked if I had suffered cramps or muscle pain during the night; I truthfully replied that I had (I was not given the chance to provide detail this occurred twice in those years) and without any further investigation was recommended a

supplement to relieve the condition. Here some background is necessary. I cycle at least 20km on most days and believe that a lack of care about my hydration on a couple of days probably caused the cramps. However, I had no chance for this to be taken into account before the recommendation was made ... without specific mention of the product, I had to ask what I was being recommended (with no documentary support). I voiced my concerns about the value and efficacy of supplements and was immediately referred to the on-duty pharmacist who assured me that of the numerous people who had bought the substance on recommendation none had complained and some had reported improvement.

The recommendation of a supplement, that in my opinion has limited evidence supporting its general use, in a professional medical environment caused me concern even though I held a well researched belief I felt under considerable pressure to purchase the item. I did not. However, I feel that many people with less well established attitudes and opinion about supplements would have purchased the item, and once purchased would have become supportive of its use ... this is a common behavioural outcome related to a wide range of personal decisions.

At the forum itself one pharmacist who follows this process mildly ridiculed the use of "Dr Google" in the formation of opinion in this area, without knowing the method or extent of my research, and stated that he'd recommended the supplement to his own parent as proof of his goodwill and his belief in the substance's possible efficacy the use of professional standing to sell a products that many health professional openly disparage with the power of professional standing, maybe backed up by a 'personal story' concerns me.

I believe that this method is not confined to pharmacies in my town and feel that the practice could produce more harm than good, in that an expense is being incurred for a product of dubious value when the money could be spent more effectively on good advice and a better diet. A piece of evidence that the retail practice is widespread and thought justifiable is illustrated by the quote below from the "Pharmacy Development Services" website which provides business advice to pharmacy owners -
<http://www.pharmacyowners.com/blog/the-importance-of-upselling-and-cross-selling-in-your-independent-pharmacy>

"Although your primary focus should be to provide extraordinary patient care, it's also important that you sell to become profitable and to keep your doors open. The majority of what you sell are prescription drugs, but you likely offer other products such as, over the counter medications, vitamins, and convenience merchandise. So, how do you sell these products and increase revenue without your customers feeling like you're pushing products on them? The answer lies in upselling and cross-selling." The Importance of Upselling and Cross-Selling in Your Independent Pharmacy, Nicolette Mathey, Aug 4, 2015.



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