

Public Health Association of New Zealand Policy on Direct-To-Consumer Advertising of Prescription Medicines (2001)

The Public Health Association notes:

1. The promotion of prescription medicines is generally seen as raising special ethical and regulatory difficulties such that DTCA is banned in all developed countries – except the United States and New Zealand – and promotion practices to health professionals are closely monitored.
2. The introduction of a much more liberal interpretation of the existing legislation on the promotion of medicines in New Zealand has been accompanied by a striking increase in advertising activity in the principal media.
3. The body established to oversee this regime - the Advertising Standards Authority - has a predominantly commercial brief rather than a public health one. A Medsafe report shows almost complete failure of the regime to protect the quality of information of medicines advertising.
4. Concerns about the possible impact of a liberal regime of DTCA have been voiced by some health professional leaders and health bureaucrats.

The Public Health Association affirms the following principles:

1. *Promotion of the availability of high-quality information about medicines both for the public and for health professionals.* This is consistent with a broader interest in encouraging evidence-based decision-making, as much for health consumers as for policy-makers.
2. *Advocacy for a regulatory system that encourages restraint and ethical behaviour in the interests of wider public health goals.* . It is highly questionable whether a commercially-driven direct to consumer advertising system for prescription medicines can do this.
3. *Action to prevent potential health risks to individuals due to inappropriate DTCA-inspired use of particular advertised pharmaceuticals when other regimes (drug and/or otherwise) may be more beneficial.*

4. *Prudent use of scarce public finances in the health sector.* DTCA threatens not only to expand the market well beyond its initial clinically defined boundaries - thus placing pressure on publicly funded budgets - but it also may increase the advertising component in product pricing, thus fostering wastage of scarce resources

The Public Health Association believes the following steps should be taken:

1. DTCA of prescription pharmaceuticals should be prohibited.
2. In its place a regulatory regime should be established that encourages non-commercial campaigns promoting appropriate use of medicines (for example, flu immunisation for the over-65s, or correct use of asthma inhalers among children, or sensible use of antibiotics).

Review

This policy should be reviewed in three years, or sooner if a government decision on Direct-to-consumer advertising of pharmaceuticals is announced.