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Self care and the role of the non-prescription medicines industry in the battle against obesity

Submission to the Preventative Health Taskforce

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BETTER HEALTH THROUGH RESPONSIBLE SELF CARE



The Australian Self Medication Industry (ASMI) is the voice of the consumer self care products industry in Australia; it aims to drive a credible and expanding evidence-based self-medication market to generate cost-effective health solutions and improved public health outcomes.

ASMI and its members support the initiatives of the National Preventative Health Taskforce, as set out by the Obesity Working Party,¹ for tackling the burden of chronic disease currently caused by obesity. The overarching goal of which has been identified as the prevention of unhealthy weight gain.

Of particular interest to ASMI are the observations that the contribution of Australian industry is a crucial component of the response needed to tackle the obesity problem. In this context, the weight loss industry is cited. The weight loss industry is described as encompassing a wide range of options, which whilst popular have limited data to support their effectiveness. The Obesity Working Party suggests that there is a need to ensure that industry practices are safe and effective. ASMI fully endorses this objective.

ASMI believes that industry has an important role to play in the battle against obesity by providing:

- o Evidence-based OTC medicines for the treatment and prevention of obesity,
- o Information and behavioural support for people who try to lose weight,
- o Education for health care professionals and support staff.

ASMI has a proven track record of working with its members to promote and deliver public health benefits, and an example of this is reducing the prevalence of smoking through anti-smoking awareness campaigns and nicotine replacement therapy (NRT). People who are overweight face similar issues to those who smoke; as they move through various stages of preparedness before achieving long-term behavioural changes with resultant improved health outcomes. These lessons can be applied to address the obesity epidemic.

¹ National Preventative Health Taskforce Technical report No 1. Obesity in Australia: a need for urgent action. 2008. Prepared by the Obesity Working Group.

As with smokers who may initially try to quit by going cold turkey, many overweight people attempt self-help" strategies.¹ Each year vast numbers of people enrol in commercial self-help programs. Yet, convincing evidence for the efficacy of many of these programmes is lacking.²⁻⁵ ASMI is of the opinion that people who are overweight deserve to have access to proven treatments, including over-the-counter (OTC) medicines that have been rigorously evaluated.

Industry is well placed to develop and deliver campaigns to create awareness about all aspects of overweight and obesity, including the critical importance of lifestyle factors as well as evidence-based strategies to reduce weight. Research indicates that advertising to consumers prompts patients to seek further information, motivate questions for healthcare providers and help patients to ask better-informed questions.⁶ Importantly, this research also found that doctors believed patients were better able to understand that they need to consult a health care professional about appropriate treatment.

Whilst raising awareness of specific products is the primary goal of consumer advertising, the ability to communicate with consumers has many other benefits. In the case of clinically proven weight loss products, such benefits include:

- o Consumer empowerment by dispelling the "magic bullet" myth and promoting the understanding that long-term weight loss goals can, in many cases, be achieved through the use of evidence-based pharmacological interventions in combination with behavioural support and advice.
- o Consumer education via provision of information about overweight and obesity which leads to improved health literacy and increased ability to rectify the current situation in which many Australians perceive being overweight as 'normal'.

Finally, industry can and has played a significant role in educating GPs and pharmacists and their support staff (pharmacy assistants) by providing comprehensive information and training in relation to the appropriate use of OTC products. The ability to foster collaborative relationships between consumers and pharmacists and other healthcare providers through these support programs results in a more team-focused approach to weight management.

In conclusion, ASMI believes there are substantive parallels in the fights against smoking and obesity. In the smoking cessation arena, the public health benefits of ongoing initiatives to widen access and educate consumers about the benefits of quitting smoking using NRT versus going "cold turkey" have clearly begun to pay off. Applying such strategies to evidence-based weight loss programs is not only in concert with the goal of the National Preventative Taskforce but has the potential to positively enhance public health outcomes in the battle against obesity.

References

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