Serving Australians: A system of community pharmacy

Community pharmacists are the custodians of the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme and play a vital role in the primary health care of all Australians.

Australia has the best system of community pharmacy in the world. It is envied by other nations for the way it delivers medicines to the public in a convenient, affordable and equitable manner.

The Federal Government subsidises the provision of prescription medications of proven efficacy through the network of about 5,500 pharmacist-owned community pharmacies through the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme (PBS). Community pharmacists efficiently dispense subsidised medicines that heal the sick, improve quality of life for the chronically ill and – in many cases – save lives. Without the PBS, and committed pharmacists to monitor and manage the supply of medicines to the community, the cost of medicines would increase and health outcomes would be severely compromised.

Along with Australia’s unique medicine scheduling system and a range of professional health services, the PBS comprises the backbone of community pharmacy in this country.

Community pharmacists are medicine experts, providing professional advice and counselling on medications, including their use and effects, as well as general healthcare. Their services are highly accessible – in the vast majority of cases, these services are offered to consumers free of charge and without the need to make an appointment. Regardless of where they live, all Australians have the same access to PBS medicines (within 72 hours) at no financial disadvantage.

Pharmacists are accountable for every piece of advice and service provided in their pharmacies. Their continuing registration and approval to dispense medication under the PBS depends on them always being present in the pharmacy and abiding by the rules of the Pharmacy Board. A pharmacist who loses registration cannot continue to operate a pharmacy or even work in one. That is at once a powerful public protection and a sanction against any lessening of professional standards.

Pharmacists develop strong relationships with their patients, sometimes over generations, as many people enjoy the benefits of patronising a single pharmacy. The stronger the pharmacist-patient relationship, the better the health outcomes that can be expected.

• No monopoly on health: Australian community pharmacies are privately and independently owned in a highly competitive market
• World class standards: the majority of pharmacies, currently over 95 per cent, are accredited by a quality assurance framework called the Quality Care Pharmacy Program
• Advice and service for everyone: on average there are more than 14 visits to a community pharmacy per year for each man, woman and child in Australia. 5.5 million Australians ask their pharmacist for health-related advice every year
• Approximately 170,000 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders are estimated to benefit from the increased access to PBS medicines and better quality use of medicines activities
• The Australian community pharmacy workforce is made up of around 60,000 people including pharmacists, interns, specially trained dispensary technicians and pharmacy assistants
• Community pharmacy is a more than $15 billion health industry, including more than $10 billion in prescription sales per year
• Community pharmacies dispense more than 297 million prescriptions annually, including 216 million PBS/RPS subsidised prescriptions
• Total dispensary sales represent around 63 per cent of all sales through pharmacies
• The average community pharmacy dispenses 54,482 prescriptions per year
• As at 30 June 2015 there were 5,510 community pharmacies, each providing services to an average of 4,305 people across Australia

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