



Supermarket pharmacies... bad for health?

In Australia, healthcare is best left to health professionals and their patients.

Some individuals and organisations claim that having supermarkets run pharmacies would benefit consumers and the Government. The Pharmacy Guild does not believe it is in the best interests of patients to allow pharmacies in supermarkets. Australia's current world-class pharmacy system is

- backed by a highly-specialised wholesale distribution system; and
- strongly emphasises professional health care and the quality use of medicines.

The Guild believes that this is the best way of maintaining high levels of professionalism in the practice of pharmacy, and is ultimately best for both consumers and Governments.

Small businesses threatened

There are numerous reasons for opposing the absorption of another small business sector into large corporations, such as Australia's very powerful supermarket chains. The two major grocery retailers in Australia, Woolworths and Coles, control approximately 80 per cent of the Australian retail grocery market between them. The merit of this has been questioned by politicians, consumer bodies and commentators in recent years.

Both Woolworths and Coles have openly expressed their desire to include pharmacy in their supermarket operations. Acquisitions in liquor and petrol in recent years have demonstrated how quickly they are able to dominate new markets. In pharmacy, this may lead to Woolworths and Coles having a higher degree of control over prices. It places Governments under considerable pressure to change the nature of pharmacy, moving it from its current emphasis on quality use of medicines.

Pharmacists are health professionals

Pharmacists are trained and ethically obliged to care about patients and health outcomes as an integral part of their professionally run business. They are the most accessible of all health professionals.

Many pharmacists establish ongoing relationships with their customers/patients. This has the added benefit of building a knowledge base about regular customers/patients, so that health advice can be more accurate and focussed. However, supermarkets are legally obliged to put shareholders and profit first.

There are some necessary but unprofitable or unwieldy services currently available through community pharmacies that a supermarket would be unlikely to provide, such as provision of methadone or needle supply programs.

Consumer Protection

Four of Woolworths five biggest selling products are cigarettes and it sells billions of dollars worth of alcohol each year — two major causes of disease and death.

Woolworths argues that allowing it to own pharmacies will increase competition and has mooted taking over the wholesale supply chain. Both members of Australia's supermarket 'duopoly' have been fined by the competition watchdog for anti-competitive behaviour in the past.

Australian patients as individuals pay less for most medicines than in almost any other country in the world thanks to the PBS and the current system of pharmacy. But Woolworths claims that Australians are paying too much for medicines and that patients would save money if corporate ownership of pharmacies was permitted. Such a system does not deliver cheaper medicines to consumers in the USA.

The Pharmacy Guild of Australia is the national peak body representing community pharmacy. It serves the interests of its members and supports community pharmacy in its role delivering quality health outcomes to all Australians.

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