

Improving 'health literacy' key to improving health

There are few things more powerful than a well-informed patient, and an improvement in 'health literacy' is likely to significantly improve health results for New Zealanders, says PHARMAC's Medical Director Dr Peter Moodie.

Prescribing people medicine is one thing, but if those medicines aren't used correctly then the value of prescribing decisions can be significantly diminished, Dr Moodie writes in the agency's 2006 Annual Review, released today.

"PHARMAC's role is not just about subsidising pharmaceuticals – it is also about ensuring those medicines are used wisely," Dr Moodie says. "Of course, it is essential any medicines policy ensures the right mix of funded drugs is available. Ensuring maximum value from those decisions, however, requires the right medicines to be used by the right people at the right time. Key to achieving this is ensuring people understand what they are being prescribed, what it is for and how to make the best use of it."

Dr Moodie says that there is already an increasing trend towards people being more information hungry, and being keen to take personal responsibility for their health.

"This move towards a more preventive approach to health is likely to have great long-term benefits, both to individuals and to the healthcare system as a whole," Dr Moodie says. "PHARMAC is already playing its part through its role to promote the responsible use of medicines, and this is likely to become an increasingly important part of the healthcare mix in future."

PHARMAC's campaigns include such programmes as the Wise Use of Antibiotics campaign, new resources to help people manage diabetes, and the continued implementation of the One Heart Many Lives cardiovascular campaign.

Dr Moodie says PHARMAC made a number of important decisions in the past year that support the work of campaigns like One Heart Many Lives. The campaign encourages people to make lifestyle changes to reduce their risk of having a heart attack or stroke. The role of medicines, like cholesterol-lowering statins or the blood-thinning low dose aspirin, are also emphasised.

Dr Moodie says people can take positive steps to improve their health through lifestyle changes, such as reducing smoking, eating better and through people becoming more active. However, medicines have an important role too.

"The reality is it will take time to turn around the 'lifestyle ship', so medicines that reduce risk can be beneficial. Cholesterol-lowering drugs like statins, blood pressure medications like ACE inhibitors and even the use of low-dose aspirin can all help."

Dr Moodie points to Grant Smith of Rotorua, who tells his story in the Annual Review, as an example of what can be done.

Grant Smith weighed 190kg, had Type 2 diabetes, and couldn't get a job. He says he never went to a doctor because he didn't want to pay \$50 just to be told that he had to lose weight. The death of his wife three years ago from diabetes complications was ultimately the catalyst that led Grant Smith to change his lifestyle.

After changing his eating habits and working up an exercise programme that led to him completing a marathon last year, he lost 55 kg and now has a job with the local runanga in the health area. It is a remarkable story that underscores the raw power of commitment and personal responsibility.

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