



Death of pharmacy or safer dispensing?

The letter from Christopher Jones published recently in the NZMJ (<http://www.nzma.org.nz/journal/116-1172/408/>)¹ clearly expresses a narrow view of the PHARMAC proposal. Returning to limited stat dispensing for many commonly used medicines would make it easier for patients to get their medicines and free up time for pharmacists to talk with their customers – something that both patients and pharmacists have been seeking for some time. According to pharmacists, the current volume of dispensing has put patient safety at risk. Pharmacists themselves have been demanding that the Government act to reduce this risk to patient safety.

In March 2003, the front-page story in *Pharmacy Today* voiced concern from pharmacists and the Pharmacy Guild that increased dispensing was putting people's lives at risk and that DHBs faced increased medicines-related incidents resulting in more hospital admissions. An Auckland pharmacist was quoted as saying 'I recently did 250 scripts on my own...and I went home and told my wife I hoped I hadn't made a mistake.'

The President of the Guild, Richard Heslop, voiced his concerns about the 'unsustainable volume of dispensing' in a series of letters to the Minister of Health in September 2002. He called on DHBs and PHARMAC to work together to address dispensing volume issues. Given these clear demands from pharmacists and their representatives, I am surprised that many in the profession have taken such a single-minded view of the PHARMAC proposal.

The proposal would mean a reduction in pharmacists' workload and, quite rightly, this reduction in volume would be reflected in the amount pharmacists receive from taxpayers – less work, less pay.

This year, pharmacies will earn over \$220m from dispensing fees from the Government. Pharmacists' incomes did receive a boost when monthly dispensing was introduced and have grown 31% in the last four years. Despite this, there has not been a massive increase in the number of pharmacies; instead, pharmacists have complained that they are overworked. Rather than representing the death of pharmacy, the proposed change might actually be an opportunity for pharmacists to focus on providing an improved service to customers, allow busy pharmacists to concentrate on fully participating in the new PHO environment, or simply reduce staff stress.

PHARMAC has extended the consultation period to 30 May. This will allow time for all interested parties to consider the proposal and its many different aspects. I would encourage you to look at the benefits to patients and the sector when you make your submission.

Wayne McNee
Chief Executive
PHARMAC

Reference:

1. Jones C. The death of pharmacy as we know it. NZMJ 2003;116(1172). URL: <http://www.nzma.org.nz/journal/116-1172/408/>