



**Community Quality Use of Medicines and Diagnostics
Project**

**Information Use and Needs of
Complementary Medicines Users:
A Consumer Discussion Paper**

June 2011

Community Quality Use of Medicines and Diagnostics Project

Information Use and Needs of Complementary Medicines Users: A Consumer Discussion Paper

Introduction

The Consumers Health Forum of Australia (CHF) is the national peak body representing the interests of Australian healthcare consumers. CHF works to achieve safe, quality, timely healthcare for all Australians, supported by accessible health information and systems.

CHF began working in collaboration with *NPS: Better Choices, Better Health* (NPS) in 2000 to provide a consumer perspective on issues relating to the quality use of medicines (QUM). CHF welcomes the opportunity to continue working with NPS and is currently working on the 2010-11 Community Quality Use of Medicines and Diagnostics (CQUM/D) Project.

Key objectives of the contract include:

- Provide strategic advice regarding consumer perspectives on QUM issues
- Support consumers to contribute and participate in NPS Advisory Groups
- Develop and build diversity around key topical health areas

A key element of the current collaboration between CHF and NPS involves consumer consultation on the findings of NPS's *Information Use and Needs of Complementary Medicines Users Report* (the NPS report).

The purpose of this Paper is to summarise the findings of the report and present discussion questions on the gaps and issues it identifies. CHF encourages responses from consumers from a wide variety of backgrounds and experience, recognising that consumer perspectives are vital in creating effective health policy.

These discussion questions will be complemented by up to two consumer teleconferences, to be held on Monday 20 June 2011.

Information Use and Needs of Complementary Medicines Users

The aim of the research presented in the NPS report was to provide a better understanding of current Australian consumer attitudes to complementary medicines, and their information needs and preferences. The research investigated:

- How and why people use complementary medicines
- Their attitudes and knowledge regarding complementary medicines
- Their current information seeking and future preferences for information about complementary medicines.

The research defined complementary medicines as including:

- herbal medicines
- vitamin and mineral supplements
- other nutritional supplements
- traditional medicines such as Ayurvedic medicines
- traditional Chinese medicines
- homoeopathic medicines
- aromatherapy oils that make therapeutic claims.

In the consumer surveys and interviews undertaken as part of the research, the terms ‘natural and herbal remedies’ and ‘natural medicines and health products’ were also used as these terms were previously shown to be better understood by consumers.

The research was conducted in two phases: a national cross-sectional telephone survey of 612 randomly selected users of complementary medicines; and in-depth semi-structured interviews with a sample of 24 survey respondents.

The results of this work, including CHF’s consultations, will underpin the development of strategies to address gaps in skills and provide information to assist decision-making by consumers and health professionals about complementary medicines.

Findings

The research showed that those who use complementary medicines think differently about them compared to conventional medicines, particularly compared to prescription medicines. Many consumers saw their complementary medicines use as ‘natural’ and part of a holistic view of health.

Key Questions

1. Have you or would you ever consider using complementary medicines and health products? (For example, vitamins, mineral supplements, herbal teas, homeopathic medicines, etc.) Would you ever consider consulting with a natural therapist? (For example, aromatherapist, homeopath, traditional Chinese medicine practitioner, etc.)
2. If you answered yes to one of the above questions, for what purpose might you visit a natural therapist or use a complementary medicine? (For example, back pain, cholesterol, general health, preventative health, etc.)
3. What do you think are the main advantages or disadvantages of using natural medicines and health products?

You are welcome to include examples and cite personal experiences.

The research found that consumers believe complementary medicines are ‘safer’ than conventional medicines. It also indicated that some consumers are unaware that complementary medicines have potential harms associated with side effects, exceeding the recommended dose, allergies and interactions with conventional medicines.

The interviews showed that consumers believe that the manufacturers of complementary medicines have tested their products for efficacy, particularly when specific claims are made in relation to special properties and results.

More than half (52 per cent) of survey respondents also believed that complementary medicines are tested by a regulator or an independent third party, such as the Therapeutic Goods Administration (TGA).

Key Questions

4. Although complementary medicines are registered or listed on the Australian Register of Therapeutic Goods (ARTG), they are not tested for efficacy. Were you aware of this prior to reading this report? Do you think this is well understood by health consumers and the general public?
5. Do you think that consumers using complementary medicines should be more aware of how the products are regulated? If so, how could consumers be informed? (For example, a warning label advising that the product has not been tested for efficacy.)

You are welcome to include examples and cite personal experiences.

Complementary medicines users reported that their own experience is critical in assessing the safety and effectiveness of these medicines. Many consumers reported using complementary medicines to enhance health, support the performance of everyday tasks and enhance their capacity to cope with difficult tasks or stress. Some people also use them to treat or manage a condition or deficiency.

Consumers most commonly reported seeking complementary medicines information through word of mouth, such as:

- Family and friends (55 per cent)
- Websites and online discussion forums (51 per cent)
- Health food shop workers (38 per cent)
- Pharmacists (37 per cent)
- Magazines (37 per cent)
- Doctors and general practitioners (34 per cent)
- Package inserts, labels or pamphlets (30 per cent).

Almost one third of complementary medicines users also reported seeking information about complementary medicines from one or more complementary therapists.

Nearly half (46.7 per cent) of the survey respondents did not discuss their use of complementary medicines with a doctor. The research also showed that some of the information sources used by consumers, particularly word of mouth, discussion forums and magazines, are of variable quality, reliability and authority.

The study found that, in future, complementary medicines users would prefer to source information about these medicines from doctors (30 per cent), the internet (25 per cent) and pharmacists (24 per cent).

Key Questions

6. Where would you seek information about complementary medicines?
7. How would you assess the potential effectiveness of complementary medicines before using a product?
8. Would you discuss your use of complementary medicines with your doctor or other health professionals? Why or why not?
9. In future, where would you prefer to be able to access information about complementary medicines?

You are welcome to include examples and cite personal experiences.

Conclusion

The study found that many consumers using complementary medicines are not aware of many of their side effects or their potential interaction with conventional medicines. This might put some users at unnecessary risk of harm. The study also indicates that some consumers are using some complementary medicines for general wellbeing or to prevent illness, despite a lack of evidence for this.

Significantly, the study also found that consumers do not always discuss the use of complementary medicines with their doctors, and in some cases are reliant on sources of information that are of variable quality, reliability and authority.

Those interested in reviewing the full report can download it here:

http://www.nps.org.au/data/assets/pdf_file/0010/66619/Complementary_Medicines_Report_-_Consumers.pdf.

Next Steps

These discussion questions will be complemented by up to two consumer teleconferences, to be held on Monday 20 June 2011. CHF will report the outcomes of these consultations to the NPS, as well as drawing upon the consumer feedback to inform our ongoing policy work in the medicines area. Responses to this paper will also inform CHF's future policy work on complementary medicines.

The questions asked in this paper are intended as a guide. Comments do not need to be restricted to the questions or points that have been raised. Consumers are encouraged to include examples and provide personal experiences.

Further Information

Further information about CHF's Community Quality Use of Medicines and Diagnostics project can be found on the CHF website www.chf.org.au. Alternatively, interested persons can contact Maiy Azize, Project Officer at m.azize@chf.org.au or (02) 6273 5444 (STD calls will be returned).

Responses are requested by Wednesday 22 June 2011.

Consumers Health Forum of Australia Inc
PO Box 3099
Manuka ACT 2603
Telephone (02) 6273 5444
Fax (02) 6273 5888
Email info@chf.org.au
www.chf.org.au



The Consumers Health Forum of Australia (CHF) is the national peak body representing the interests of Australian healthcare consumers. CHF works to achieve safe, quality, timely healthcare for all Australians, supported by accessible health information and systems.

CHF does this by:

1. advocating for appropriate and equitable healthcare
2. undertaking consumer-based research and developing a strong consumer knowledge base
3. identifying key issues in safety and quality of health services for consumers
4. raising the health literacy of consumers, health professionals and stakeholders
5. providing a strong national voice for health consumers and supporting consumer participation in health policy and program decision making

CHF values:

- our members' knowledge, experience and involvement
- development of an integrated healthcare system that values the consumer experience
- prevention and early intervention
- collaborative integrated healthcare
- working in partnership

CHF member organisations reach millions of Australian health consumers across a wide range of health interests and health system experiences. CHF policy is developed through consultation with members, ensuring that CHF maintains a broad, representative, health consumer perspective.

CHF is committed to being an active advocate in the ongoing development of Australian health policy and practice.