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Doctors claim Australia throws 'caution to the wind' in pharmacists' prescriptions

EXCLUSIVE
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7:49PM APRIL 11, 2023
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Health Minister Mark Butler, right, and president of the Pharmacy guild Trent Twomey in Canberra last year, visited Capital Chemist in Kingston. Hundreds of pharmacists are already in training for prescribing in Queensland and NSW. Picture: NCA NewsWire / Gary Ramage

Pharmacists have dismissed claims that chemists prescribing for urinary tract infection might result in the misdiagnosis of a suite of life-threatening conditions, labelling doctors' groups' objections an impediment to healthcare system reform.

The war between pharmacists and peak doctors' groups has ramped up as pharmacist prescribing rolls out steadily around the country and the nation's peak GP college pushes for an increase to medication pack sizes.

Urologists hold concerns that pharmacists are not equipped to diagnose simple UTIs because symptoms of the condition such as stinging upon urination may be indicative of other serious health conditions.

South Australian urologist Ashani Couchman, a surgeon on the board of directors of the Urological Society of Australia and New Zealand, said she was concerned patients might not divulge to a pharmacist the full extent of their symptoms and - circumstances.

"UTI is perceived as a really simple thing, particularly in women; if there's burning or stinging, it's easy to say 'Oh, look, you must have a UTI'. That is a knee-jerk response to a group of symptoms which can present in ectopic pregnancy, they can present in cancers, they can present in inflammation, and in other organs of the pelvis it can be an STD.

"So there is a range of things it can be, and the problem is in discerning that. Our concern is if you believe you're treating a UTI, then the response is an antibiotic, and there may be an error in diagnosis and certainly treatment."

Pharmacist-prescribing for UTIs is in place in Queensland, where a wider north Queensland trial in which pharmacists would be authorised to diagnose and treat 23 conditions is under way.

NSW and Victoria plan to follow Queensland.

Hundreds of pharmacists are already in training in Queensland and NSW in the lead-up to the health system reform, which has also been championed by federal Health Minister Mark Butler.

The Australian Medical Association is lobbying hard against the expansion of pharmacist-prescribing trials, which it says "threaten safety, fragment care, and undermine Australia's world-class health system".

"What we're particularly concerned about is that various state and territory governments are ... bypassing other regulatory systems in place, like the TGA, scheduling of medicines, and going rogue on the ability for non-medical prescribing, without any medical oversight, without clinical governance and safety frameworks," AMA vice-president Danielle McMullen said.

"We've looked around the world and there aren't other examples of this autonomous prescribing. Yes, there are some places around the world where non-medical people do some prescribing but that is by and large in structures where there is medical oversight, it's very limited, and it's very structured."

Pharmacy Guild of Australia president Trent Twomey said the comments were untrue and there were only three conditions included in the trials for which pharmacists could prescribe autonomously.

"This trial has 23 specific conditions that pharmacists are limited to providing services in. There is no limitation in the UK, in Canada. This doesn't go anywhere near as far as system reform in other highly developed countries. This has appropriate safety mechanisms, appropriate training, it is patient-centred," he said.

"This Chicken Little approach by these lobby groups just deals them out of the conversation on healthcare system reform," Mr Twomey said.

The debate comes as the Royal Australian College of GPs lobbies for a doubling in prescription lengths to 60 days, as the Pharmacy Guild pushes for further reductions on the cap on medicine payments from \$30 to \$19.

NATASHA ROBINSON, HEALTH EDITOR
Natasha Robinson began her career at The Australian in 2004. A Walkley awards finalist and a Kennedy Awards winner, she was appointed Health Editor in 2019, and has covered rounds including national affairs, indige... [Read more](#)

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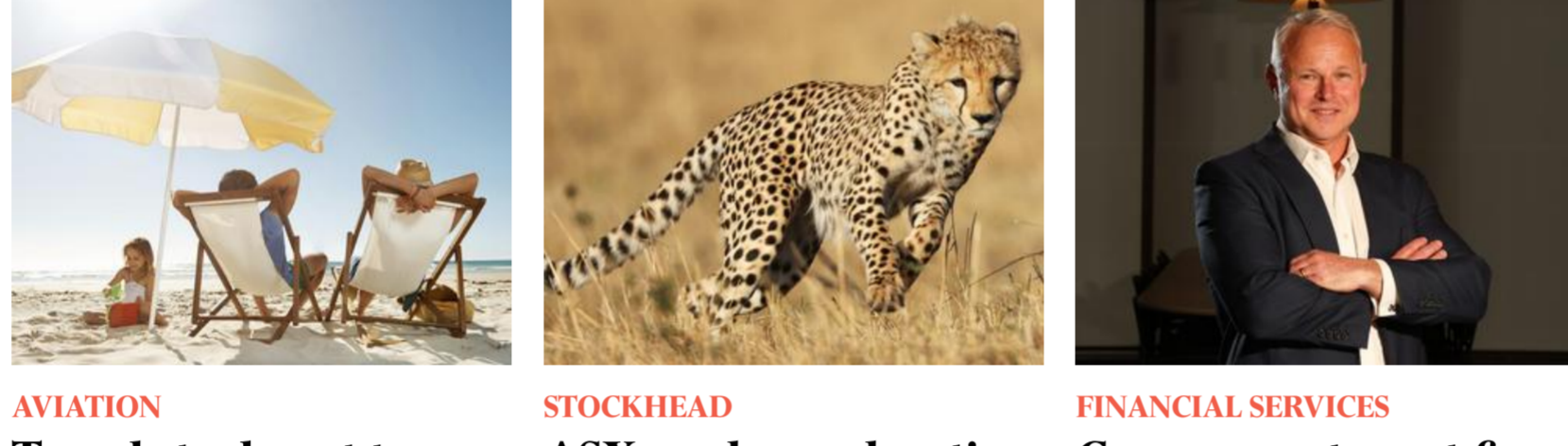
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Richard 51 MINUTES AGO

Pharmacist in GENERAL now do injections for Covid and other common infections. As such they HAVE to have a separate private room, away from public sight, so comments of lack of privacy are a statement of total error. The huge acceptance of the vaccination program in pharmacy certainly shows the majority of the public support and appreciate the pharmacy involvement. In addition, national reviews of the most TRUSTED professionals in Australia ALWAYS have pharmacist either equal first with nurses or second to nurses, with doctors several places back.

Report Like 1 Reply

Rubicon 1 HOUR AGO

Doctors rightly can't own pharmacies because there is a conflict of interest. Similarly pharmacists prescribing medications is also a conflict of interest. Furthermore pharmacists are not medically trained to understand the full gamut of possible diagnoses for a presentation.

Report Like 4 Reply

Matt 1 HOUR AGO

"threaten safety, fragment care, and undermine Australia's world-class health system"

And threaten GP's bottom line.

Report Like 1 Reply

John 1 HOUR AGO

How does this affect continuity in record keeping for patients.? What records are kept where?

Report Like 3 Reply

Bill from Brisbane 1 HOUR AGO

If legislation to allow pharmacists to prescribe also indemnifies them if they get it wrong it is an appalling prospect.

Wife

Report Like 2 Reply

Bill from Brisbane 1 HOUR AGO

Will the Pharmacist's insurance cover him or her and compensate the patient in the case of them getting it wrong and causing harm?

Wife

Report Like 2 Reply

Robert 2 HOURS AGO

12 month prescriptions where people take the same medication at the same dosage for decades would be a good all round start to better use of both resources doctors and pharmacists and just by the way help the people who matter, the patients. But equally I'm sure if someone was to ignore the money making aspect of each then there are probably many more benefits for the country .

Report Like 2 Reply

SJ 1 HOUR AGO

Well said.

Report Like 1 Reply

Gael 2 HOURS AGO

GPs working in high turnover clinics simply treat a UTI with antibiotics. At the most a dip stick in a sample would be the only "testing" done. And anyone who isn't colour blind can do that.

UTIs are in general just that. A mild infection. Stop the turf wars.

Report Like 1 Reply

Patrick 2 HOURS AGO

Investigation of my UTI turned up a cancer in one of my kidneys.

Report Like 1 Reply

RUSSELL 1 HOUR AGO

Other conditions can present symptomatically as UTI. Miss those and you will be sued. You would have absolutely no defence.

Report Like 1 Reply

Michael 2 HOURS AGO

If Pharmacists what to prescribe let them complete a medical degree.

Report Like 12 Reply

Rod Taylor 2 HOURS AGO

Then they wouldn't be pharmacists

Report Like 1 Reply

Robert 2 HOURS AGO

For goodness sake the pharmacists would only be prescribing antibiotics for a suspected UTI, if they are wrong the medication won't kill the person, but if UTIs are left untreated then the possibility of sepsis is very real, end of story.

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