

An Open Letter to...

The Pharmacists of Australia

Australians trust Pharmacies and Chemists' shops. As pharmacists, you play an important role in the health of the Australian public by functioning as a conduit between doctors and prescription or pharmacy drugs. You also have a respected role as a first resource for medical advice for many people in our community. We are all familiar with the slogan "Ask your Pharmacist".

When we ask our Pharmacist, what kinds of answers do we want? Not quack products like ear candles that do nothing except pose a hazard. We now ask our Australian pharmacists: What standards do you set for yourselves?

You sell a growing number of products for which there is little or no scientific evidence of efficacy. Calling them "alternative" does not make them work. Examples include homeopathic preparations, magnetic pain relief devices, detox programmes, dodgy weight loss products and ear candles. Such products commonly appear in a "Natural Medicine" section of pharmacies but are sometimes displayed alongside real medicines whose benefits are scientifically proven.

Ear candles are of particular concern. There are reports of serious injuries from them including temporary hearing loss, burns, ear canals blocked by dripping wax and punctured ear drums.¹ Health Canada has banned them in Canada.² Even the first professor of alternative and complementary medicine at Exeter University, Edzard Ernst, called for them to be banned.³ Despite this, many Australian pharmacies are selling them.

*"Ear candling is one of those CAM modalities that clearly does more harm than good... its mechanism of action is first implausible and second, demonstrably wrong... in my view, therefore, it should be banned."*³

What next, will you start selling cigarettes like the supermarkets, who you do not want to be allowed to sell pharmaceuticals because they do not have qualified staff? What standards do you set for yourselves for staff?

We see a growing trend of so-called "practitioners" with little or no scientific training being brought in as "consultants" including iridologists, homeopaths and naturopaths.

Iridology is a discredited way of diagnosing the dysfunction of internal organs via the markings on the iris. There is no evidence that it works but some pharmacies promote the fact that customers can get "readings" in their stores.

Your customers rely on you and anyone in a professional capacity within your store to provide sound medical advice and products. We fear that in some cases they are receiving what amounts to little more than magical sugar pills and spurious health advice.

Pharmacies need to make a profit, but this should not be done through quack products and bad advice. To regain the status a pharmacy should have – a place to get sound advice and effective medicine, supported by scientific and clinical evidence – we implore our pharmacists to stick to worthy products sold by knowledgeable staff.

Australian Skeptics Inc.

1. Seely DR, Quigley SM, Langman AW. *Ear candles – efficacy and safety*. Laryngoscope. 1996; 106(10): 1226-9.
2. <http://tinyurl.com/87wxcl>. last accessed February 24, 2009.
3. Ernst, E. *Ear candles: a triumph of ignorance over science*. The Journal of Laryngology and Otology. 2004; 118: 1-2.

