

News briefs

Natural remedies can prove lethal: research

A University of Adelaide researcher has warned that some popular herbal medicines can be dangerous, even lethal, despite the common perception that they are a safe alternative to conventional medicine. Forensic pathologist Professor Roger Byard reported in the *Journal of Forensic Sciences* that some herbal products had been found to contain potentially lethal levels of arsenic, mercury or lead. Even if not contaminated, some herbs posed health risks such as liver failure, haemorrhage or heart failure. However, the Complementary HealthCare Council of Australia said that much of the report was ill-informed, misleading and irresponsible and, most importantly, not relevant to complementary medicine products sold in Australia, which are among the most tightly regulated in the world.

Compounding pharmacists' converge

The Australasian Conference for Compounding Pharmacists being held at the Swissotel in Sydney on September 11–12 is open to all pharmacists. Further information is available at www.accp.net.au. The conference will cover topics including: the future of individualised medicine and compounding in Australia; exploiting your compounding facility and increasing sales and market share; advanced formulation techniques; pain management compounding; and BHRT compounding.

Distribution of Sinemet CR

Distribution of *Sinemet CR* to pharmaceutical wholesalers has ceased until 2011. It is expected that the majority of pharmacies will not be able to fill prescriptions from March 2010 for approximately 12 months. The shortage is not related to any product quality or safety issue. Supplies of the immediate release formulation of *Sinemet* 100/25 mg and 250/25 mg tablets are not affected. Pharmacists can assist by recommending all patients currently on *Sinemet CR* make an appointment with their prescribing doctor as soon as possible to consider alternative arrangements. A patient information leaflet has been made available by MSD. Pharmacists with any queries can contact the MSD Medical Information group on 1800 645 712.



PSA National President Warwick Plunkett said Professor Sang's presence was an indication of the regard in which the conference was held

by the Chinese Government and the Chinese pharmacy profession. PSA has also invited Professor Chen Zhu, the Chinese Minister for Health, which is one of the Ministries that reports to Professor Sang.

Mr Plunkett said the Australian Embassy had been enthusiastic about the development of such a relationship between the two countries' professional pharmacy organisations and had been most supportive in facilitating interaction between the two groups.

The conference, being held in Beijing and Shanghai from 28 April to 7 May, has also been given special recognition from the Chinese Government by being granted permission to hold the Welcome Dinner in the Great Hall of the People – a rare honour. Attendance at the Offshore Conference provides the opportunity to achieve substantial CPD points ready for the new registration requirements. For registrations or further details go to the 2010 Annual Offshore Conference website at: www.psa.org.au/conference

The cost of osteoporosis

A new Access Economics report on osteoporosis in 2010 estimates the cost to the Australian economy from non-adherence to treatments at \$167 million.

Access Economics specifically reviewed the impact of non-adherence to osteoporosis treatments, which is due to a number of factors, including poor understanding by patients, a lack of monitoring by primary care providers, inconvenience of taking medications, forgetfulness and the 'invisibility' of the disease. The report says informal care is predicted to take up the largest share of financial costs, which is indicative of the impact osteoporosis, has on sufferers as well as their families and carers.

Hospital costs are estimated to be \$6.9 million due to non-adherence, with the average cost of hospitalisation for an Australian with

osteoporosis being \$5,610. The report also builds a one-year assessment of osteoporosis. Additionally, it offers a range of strategies to help improve adherence to osteoporosis therapy. Over the next decade, the report estimates:

- Three million Australians will be living with osteoporosis – but the majority won't know they have the disease.
- There will be more than 760,000 fractured bones.
- More than 50,000 lives will be lost within a year of a hip fracture.
- Over half a million hospital admissions are expected.

Additionally, the report shows 41% of Australians receiving treatment for osteoporosis are failing to maintain their therapy after a year. If this continues into 2020, it is predicted that:

- Just over 19,400 preventable fractures will occur.
- Up to 1,097 lives will be lost unnecessarily.
- The Australian economy will be dealt a blow in excess of \$1.6 billion.

The report can be accessed at: www.accesseconomics.com.au

A killer combination of abused substances

Substance abuse by itself is bad enough in that it can lead to addiction or arrest, but in some situations drug abuse leads to sudden death. A study just released by the Institute of Legal Medicine in Seville, Spain, discovered a combination of factors that resulted in death for 21 drug abusers. These deaths weren't caused by drug overdoses – it was the fatal combination of drugs that ended these lives.

The Spanish study set out to determine factors involved in sudden deaths in southwest Spain between 2003 and 2006. Through autopsies and toxicology reports, the study determined that in 3% of sudden deaths, a fatal combination of cocaine, alcohol and tobacco use caused sudden death. Among these cocaine-related deaths, 76% had also used alcohol at the time of death, and 81% were smokers.