

Pharmacy prescribing puts politics above patients

Pharmacy prescribing is a disturbing trend that may herald the further degradation of quality health care in the future. Substituting core roles of our highly trained medical workforce to other healthcare professionals, not specifically trained in the area, seems to be a favourite way for government to try and cut costs.

Unfortunately, it devalues primary care, disturbs the continuity and totality of care provided by our general practitioners and further lessens the opportunity for preventative health care which is repeatedly quoted by all levels of government as being vital to not only improve the health of all Australians, but manage costs by intervening early and decreasing the need for in-hospital treatment.

We have seen government substitute nurse practitioners for doctors to perform surgical procedures, pharmacists with commercial vested interests deliver immunisations and there is talk of non-medically trained personnel giving anaesthetics.

Queensland Health Minister Steven Miles, supported by Premier Anastacia Palaszczuk, has now enabled pharmacists to prescribe and dispense the oral contraceptive pill for women already using this method of contraception, without having to be seen, assessed and evaluated by their general practitioner or gynaecologist. This is a clear departure for pharmacists in their role and is one for which they are inadequately prepared and trained.

While pharmacists are a valued and important part of our health system, they are experts in understanding drugs. Whether it be how a drug works, how best to deliver or take the drug and what interactions a particular medication may have with other treatments that a patient is already on, a pharmacist is an expert in this field. They are not however, trained in how to diagnose or treat a particular

medical condition. Moreover, they are unable to clinically examine the patient or request the appropriate investigations that lead to a definitive diagnosis being made prior to undertaking any therapeutic options.

Pharmacist prescribing has been extensively marketed by politicians as having a significant convenience factor for women who are described as time-poor and finding it difficult to schedule regular appointments to see their general practitioner to manage their contraceptive needs.

A standard pill pack contains four months' worth of medication and with two repeats able to be given, it means a woman need only see a doctor once a year to manage her contraceptive needs.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) is already on the record as saying that Australians are far too reliant on oral contraceptives and that these older methods should be replaced by newer long-acting reversible contraceptives (LARCs) such as implants and intrauterine devices. Importantly, LARCs are cheap! A single implant can last between three and 10 years, is covered by the PBS and does not require yearly review. In addition, they are associated with a significantly lower rate of unplanned pregnancies and method failures meaning fewer abortions.

In this election year, any government wanting to help women with their contraceptive options and save both individuals and the health system significant amounts of money would do well to encourage them to see their GP or gynaecologist to discuss and update their contraceptive choice.

Instead of having medically untrained pharmacists continue to dole out old fashioned treatment without review, perhaps we could look at government funding for contraceptive clinics being reintroduced or allowing gynaecology outpatient departments to see women again for contraceptive advice.



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