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PIASA MEMBERS: ALREADY SIGNED UP FOR ETHICAL MARKETING

2009-03-17 - It's set to guide the way pharmaceutical marketers do business – but Pharmaceutical Industry Association of South Africa (PIASA) members are already conducting their marketing initiatives according to the draft Code of Practice for the Marketing of Medicines.

The South African Code was initiated to ensure an ethical standard for the marketing of medicines that is aligned with existing international codes, as well as the perverse incentives policy of the Health Professions Council of South Africa (HPCSA) which applies to all health professionals.

However, Chief Operating Officer of PIASA Vicki Ehrich says all PIASA members have already signed up to the organisation's code - which is adapted from the draft Code - and voluntarily adhere to this even while the SA Code is being finalised.

According to Ehrich, PIASA members have a long history of adhering to a code and dealing with complaints by a self-regulatory mechanism. Compliance with a code of marketing practice has been mandatory for PIASA members for over 30 years.

Deon Vos, chief executive of Merck Pharmaceuticals, says: "Merck, like all multinational companies, has a corporate Code of Marketing practice which is fully aligned to both the PIASA Code and the South African Code. These guidelines have been implemented by our company for at least the last four years."

Vos says the Code has various benefits for the consumer, marketers and pharmaceutical companies. "The exclusion of perverse incentives allows a health care practitioner to use his/her professional opinion rather than personal financial gain in making decisions relating to the consumer's health."

He, like many other PIASA members, feels that the playing fields are levelled by the Code. "Products are promoted or advertised to health care professionals based on scientific evidence," says Vos.

In agreement with Vos is Mike Mabasa, Group Corporate Affairs and Communications at Adcock Ingram: "We have applied PIASA's code from when it was first introduced. We are proud of this compliance and believe that it is consistent with our overall strategy to get the industry to support measures that would improve how we market medicines in South Africa.

In South Africa, the pharmaceutical industry is driving an initiative to have the Department of Health publish the long-awaited Code of Practice for the Marketing of Medicines in the Government Gazette and to enforce compliance on all role-players involved in the promotion, advertising, dispensing, recommendation, marketing or sale of medicines.

Success largely depends on the DoH endorsing and publishing the Code, in terms of the 1997 Medicines Control Amendment Act (No 90 of 1997), which made compliance with a SA Marketing Code for Medicines mandatory for all sellers and marketers of medicines. Some trade associations have indicated that their support for the Code depends on its publication in the Gazette, together with enforcement that ensures "level playing fields".

The Code covers the promotion of medicines to health professionals as well as the advertising of medicines directly to consumers. It further contains the proposal to form a self regulatory Marketing Code Authority (MCA) to be managed and funded by the industry to administer complaints about the promotion of medicines. The MCA would also offer training and advice on the Code. Where appropriate, compliance with the Code would also be enforced by the Law Enforcement Unit of the Department of Health, which would support the MCA.

Conclusion

It is envisaged that the Code will be endorsed by Government and published in the *Government Gazette* for public comment in 2009, after which the final version will be published.

It is anticipated that the Code will initially apply only to the marketers of so-called "orthodox" medicines, but will eventually include marketers of all types of medicines and medical devices.

In the meantime, all PIASA member companies will comply with the adapted PIASA code, which is enforced by a disciplinary procedure should there be any complaint.

With the DoH putting the South African Code of Practice for the Marketing of Medicines out for public comment shortly, Ehrich says PIASA members are keen to see their standards not only being upheld, but being legislated.

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