

Plan now for Ask About Medicines Week

With three months to go until this year's Ask About Medicines Week, **Debbie Andalo** looks into what is being planned and how this year's campaign will differ from last year's. She also describes how the Royal Pharmaceutical Society will play a leading role

Ask About Medicines Week is being held for the second year running this November. "Patient choice" will be the theme. The focus of the campaign, which will involve community, hospital and academic pharmacists, NHS organisations and the pharmaceutical industry, mirrors the "choice" agenda which is expected to dominate party political campaigns in the run up to the next general election.

But Kristin McCarthy, director of Developing Patient Partnerships (DPP), which is involved in AAMW, said the decision to select the same "choice" theme as politicians was coincidental. She explained: "We decided on the theme a while back before it got to be so political. We aren't talking about political choice. What we are talking about here is informed choice for patients. They need to have all the information necessary to make the decision to take, or not to take, their medicines."

Joanne Shaw, director of Medicines Partnership, which promotes concordance, and who is also a director of AAMW, said: "We hope to take the rather abstract concept of choice and make it real for people in the context of their choice about medicines."

The AAMW campaign, like last year, is run by a taskforce representing a consortium of organisations — Medicines Partnership, Developing Patient Partnerships (previously the Doctor Patient Partnership) and Promoting Excellence in Consumer Medicines Information (PECFMI). Melinda Letts, immediate past president of the Long-Term Medical Conditions Alliance, is also involved.

Three key messages

This year the campaign will run from November 1 to 6 and has three key messages for patients:

- All patients are entitled to be involved in deciding whether a particular medicine is right for them
- They should be able to find good quality information from a variety of sources which helps them make an informed choice
- Health professionals should help them reach any decisions

This year, for the first time, special attention will be given to patients with cancer and their families.

Joanne Shaw said that 50 per cent of patients on medication for many long-term conditions do not take their medicines as prescribed. The campaign this year aims to tackle that issue and reduce it by building on the pa-

tient and health professional partnership in reaching decisions about medication. She said: "Negotiation is the key word. Confrontation is not something we expect to happen, what we expect is partnership with the health professional." She added: "We want to help and support health professionals in supporting patients to be involved in medicines decisions. We know this is a new concept for health professionals, which is why we want to support them."

Plans are already being drawn up to create around three million pocket-sized AAMW cards for patients which will include a record of their medication. They will be similar to the cards available last year which included five key questions patients needed to ask about their medication. That card was distributed to 3.3 million customers and patients by community and hospital pharmacists and via primary care trusts.

Posters available soon

Publicity posters for display in pharmacies and doctors' surgeries will also be made available through primary care trusts this year.

An updated version of the health and medicines guide and directory, which was produced for the first campaign with the help of the Association of the British Pharmaceutical Industry, is being distributed again this year through GP surgeries and voluntary health organisations. It gives patients pointers on how to find health and medicines information and how to judge if it meets their needs.

The internet will also have a key role to play in AAMW this year. A website is planned which will have a customer focus providing links to other health and medicines information. Also, action packs, tailored to different campaign audiences, which will be available well in advance of the actual week, will be accessible on line to download. At the same time plans are also being drawn up to increase the variety of online medicines guides, offered for the first time last year as part of a pilot project called the Medicines Information Project. Last year the guides, produced as a joint initiative between AAMW, NHS Direct Online and Medicines Chest Online, gave patients information about epilepsy, colds and influenza.

The links with NHS Direct that were established last year are also being developed in 2004. A telephone help-line number for patients concerned about medicines choice will be promoted by NHS Direct.

Last year's campaign was supported by 399 different organisations and this year the AAMW wants to build on those partnerships. Ms McCarthy said: "Last year we developed a

huge base of people and this year we want to build on that. Pharmacists really engaged with the campaign. I was also pleased with how we managed to engage with primary care trusts. I don't think we were aware how much the campaign would hit a chord with them. We were also expecting a backlash from GPs along the lines that they didn't have the time to get involved, but that didn't happen."

Society will play a leading role

This year the Royal Pharmaceutical Society has decided to play a leading role. It is in the process of appointing a Council member and an Officer to co-ordinate the Society's contribution to the campaign. A donation of £15,000 to the campaign fund has also been agreed. The Society's director of corporate and strategic development Robert Darracott said: "If pharmacists are about anything they are about medicines and appropriate use of medicines. I think a lot of what pharmacists are already involved in helps patients make a choice about medicines. That is particularly true in community pharmacy with over-the-counter medicines. Pharmacists collectively are increasingly involved in these kinds of negotiations. The decision to appoint a member of staff with responsibility for AAMW means there will be a key link point for the Society to make sure that we are supporting the campaign as effectively as possible."

Last year pharmacists played a major role in distributing the AAMW patient card but, according to feedback from the profession, they gave it a mixed response. Although they acknowledged that the card helped trigger a dialogue between the pharmacist and the patient about their medication, some pharmacists thought its design and durability could be improved. There was also a problem last year with distribution with some pharmacies missing out. Ms McCarthy confirmed these issues had been taken on board this year. The cards for November will be sent direct to pharmacists and GPs and additional supplies will be made available on demand.

She said: "Pharmacists have a key role to play in ensuring the success of the campaign. With the new pharmacy contract on the horizon it provides them with an ideal showcase of what they can do for patients." Ms Shaw agreed and added: "They are the first port of call for patients — they are in a pivotal position to pick up problems which patients have with their medicines and they have the skills which are needed to support patients. They are absolutely crucial."

Further information and downloadable resources are available from the Ask About Medicines Week website at www.askaboutmedicines.org.