

Where do people go for health advice?

A report published last week says that the number of people consulting pharmacists for health care advice over the past 10 years has decreased.

Is this a cause for concern and will we see the shift reverse over the next decade? Dawn Connelly reports

Pharmacist, doctor or alternative practitioner: whom will the British public seek its health care advice from in the future? Research published last week reveals a decline in the number of people consulting pharmacists over the past 10 years — a natural fluctuation or a cause for concern?

The research was published by Mintel and the data are taken from a continuous yearly survey of 25,000 adults in random locations in Britain. The report, entitled “British lifestyles 2005”, puts the decline of 1.1 per cent down to educational campaigns to promote self-treatment and the reclassification of a number of medicines. It says that this has led to an increase in confidence among consumers in selecting their own treatments from the wide range of medicines now available on pharmacy shelves.

John D’Arcy, chief executive of the National Pharmaceutical Association, believes that the average pharmacist would disagree. “Pharmacists are saying that they are being swarmed with people asking for advice, which is good, but to the extent that it is making their workload burden difficult.” He says that pharmacists tell the NPA that they spend possibly up to a third of their time answering over-the-counter and telephone queries.

The report claims that GPs remain the preferred source of health care advice for the majority of the population. It says: “In spite of Government and pharmaceutical industry-led campaigns to ease the burden on GPs by discouraging visits for minor complaints, there has been very little change between 1994 and 2004 in the numbers seeking doctors’ guidance.”

David Pruce, director of practice and quality improvement at the Royal Pharmaceutical Society, is sceptical. He is not convinced that the conclusions drawn in the report are supported by the data. “I think it is extrapolating rather than say that the ‘preferred’ source of health care advice is the GP. They are asking ‘Have

Market trends in over-the-counter medicines

Vitamins and minerals Vitamins and dietary supplements is the only category of over-the-counter medicines to experience a decrease in market value, dropping 3 per cent in real terms in the past decade. The report suggests that this decline may be as a result of the growing market in own-label single formula vitamins as well as the adverse publicity associated with the use of some high-dose single-formula vitamin supplements. In contrast, the market for combination supplements that claim to combat fatigue and stress has experienced an increase in value, although the report warns that the fate of these products rests with the EU legislation that seeks to ban preparations containing ingredients not on the approved list of the European Food Supplements Directive.

Minor ailments and self-diagnostics Expenditure on remedies for minor ailments and self-diagnostics has risen by 63 per cent. The report says that there is considerable scope for further growth in the self-diagnostics market. It states: “Increased consumer confidence and product credibility will be the main drivers to some of the more familiar testing kits such as pregnancy or blood pressure, while Government support for self-care will encourage patients’ involvement in more complex issues such as cholesterol or heart rate monitoring.”

Complementary medicines The complementary medicines market has grown by 45 per cent since 1999. However, the survey of consumers’ attitudes to health showed that only 10.5 per cent of people preferred alternative over conventional medicine. The report says: “It may be inferred that for most people, alternative medicine is regarded as complementary to, rather than a replacement for, pharmaceutical treatments.”

you been to see a doctor, pharmacist, etc, in the past 12 months with a complaint?’ That is a totally different question to ‘What is your preferred source of health care advice?’ he says.

In addition, Mr D’Arcy points out that last year’s Mintel report showed a small shift towards greater use of pharmacies (*PJ*, 3 April 2004, p405).

Gopa Mitra, director of health policy and public affairs at the Proprietary Association of Great Britain, does not believe that the results of the survey are particularly surprising. “People value pharmacists as the experts on medicines in the high street, but do not necessarily see them as someone who can help with diagnosis.” GPs always come out on top in these sorts of surveys, she adds.

“PAGB research shows that people are still going to their GP for minor ailments. This is because they are abandoning self-medication too early and are seeking reassurance that their symptoms are not something more serious,” she says.

New contract, new opportunities

The report suggests that the new pharmacy contract is likely to lead to an increase in pharmacy consultations that will offset the current decline. It says: “The implications of such a major change in the role of pharmacists are likely to impact upon the way in which patients perceive them as a potential source of advice.” Ms Mitra agrees: “The contract offers enormous potential for pharmacists to position themselves as experts who can provide help and support for self-treatment,” she says.

Promotion of healthy lifestyles and support for self-care are essential services under

the new contract. Ms Mitra believes that pharmacists need to communicate with their customers to let them know that they can provide advice on symptoms, not just medicines. “Medicines are a natural adjunct to the support and advice that pharmacists can offer on minor ailments,” she says.

Mr D’Arcy says that an awareness campaign will be needed to let people know what the new contract is and what it will mean to them. The NPA is currently reviewing its “Ask your pharmacist” campaign to make it more focused and to incorporate messages about the new contract.

More also needs to be done in terms of the general media, suggests Mr D’Arcy. “Health pages and health interest is growing and we need to capitalise upon that . . . so that you are always reading about ways in which pharmacists can help patients,” he says.

He also believes that the Government mantra of choice and access will have an impact over the next few years. “In terms of the GP service, access is dropping. It is harder to get to see a GP. It is still the case that you can get to see a pharmacist without an appointment and I think that . . . is going to become increasingly important.”

Mr Pruce is not concerned by the results of the survey. “It demonstrates that lots of people use pharmacies and expect advice from pharmacists. I would not worry about year-on-year variation but I would expect that in another 10 years, if patients are asked about where they would go to get advice on minor ailments, pharmacy would be mentioned a lot more often.”

Attitudes to health

Mintel also commissioned research into consumers’ attitudes to their own health. The survey, conducted in January, involved 1,528 adults and the results showed:

- 46 per cent of adults would rather eat a healthy diet than take vitamins or dietary supplements
- 59 per cent of adults prefer to self-treat minor ailments
- 32 per cent of adults are prepared to consider alternative medicines in general and 28 per cent are happy to use herbal remedies