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PRESS RELEASE

www.consumersfiji.org

Fiji Pharmaceutical Society is evading the issue : Council

The Consumer Council of Fiji is not surprised by the Fiji Pharmaceutical Society's (FPS) comments in the media questioning the credibility of its report *Prices and Practices: Pharmaceutical Survey 2010* including suggestion for proper consultation with FPS. The FPS was given ample time to comment on the draft report. The President of FPS, Mr Ajay Raniga relayed his comments and concerns via a letter to the Minister of Health and a copy of that letter is appended to the report for transparency.

We find it odd and musing that the FPS contrary to earlier response on the report had sought to make another comment via the *Fiji Times* article 'Originators versus Generics' (FT 26/02/11, p.26). The article, under the authorship of Waisake Radrodo of the FPS deviates from the points raised by the society through their letter to the Minister.

The Council wishes to set the record straight and respond to the FPS's comments in that article. Firstly we object to FPS questioning the credibility of the pharmaceutical report and labeling it generalized piece of work "*without any scientific critique or analysis*". This issue was not raised in the initial comments provided by FPS via letter to Health Minister. Furthermore, it is a common trend of FPS to try and undermine the findings of all of Council's report on the pharmaceutical sector by questioning the credibility or arguing that we lack technical knowledge of the sector. FPS presented the same arguments when Council released the findings in 2007 and 2009 reports on prices of medicines. However, for the 2010 survey Council sought assistance from a pharmacist as well as the Ministry of Health. By questioning our report FPS has ran out of arguments and is trying to pull wool over the eyes of the consumers. The Council investigated this sector based on consumer complaints.

It is of no wonder that FPS has chosen not to "*debate or defend allegations of improper conduct by pharmacists*" Prices and practices in the pharmaceutical sector were the main focus of Council's survey and this is where most of the findings were revealed. The Council believes that FPS and its members have an obligation to its customers – who put trust and faith in them- to explain the unfair practice prevailing in the sector and to assure the consumers that their members will not cheat them through unfair trade practices. However, FPS very conveniently chose to disregard this issue.

On generic medicines, the Council would like to clarify that the issue of originator versus generics is a not a "*fixation*" of the Council. This is a worldwide issue and has long been the subject of debate and policy review by many governments and international agencies such as World Health Organisation and NGOs. As a developing country and with current situation where cost of living has gone up while wages remain the same, pricing is the

most important factor in decision-making for the majority of patients/consumers. Hence consumers should be informed that they also have a choice to buy generic medication if they are not able to afford expensive originator brands. In addition to this, the general practice amongst pharmacists is to dispense generic medicines for **all prescription from public hospitals**. This is the practice with CWM Hospital and with the Private Hospital.

The Council is pleased to know that FPS “*as a society strives for first do no harm practice*”. However, if FPS is so adamant about this practice then why are its members prescribing incorrect dosage of medicines to their customers. There are several examples of this, Thakorlal’s Pharmacy in Lautoka dispensed 5mg *enalapril* as seen on the packet but the label stated 10mg as per prescription. Too little or too much of any medication could have adverse effect on one’s health. A consumer unknowingly would have consumed a lower dose which is contrary to the doctor’s recommendation. Such mistakes can be fatal. Moreover, Council’s survey revealed that the majority of pharmacies in Fiji were unnecessarily charging higher prices thus indulging in profiteering. There were pharmacies that sold generic medicines at the price of originator.

The trade margins in pharmaceuticals are astronomical. The difference in price is over 400%! The pharmaceutical sector owes an explanation to the Government (provider of incentives) and the public (consumers) for these absurd anomalies in prices. Comparison of drugs that are of same brand, same manufacturer, same batch number and same quantity clearly demonstrates anomalies in pricing despite medicines placed under price control. For example, such as *Microlab frusemide* (with 460% price difference); *Stalmox amoxicillin* (with 278% price difference) are only a tip of the iceberg.

It was also noted that several pharmacies sold originator brand for maximum profits. Consumers are forced to pay for a very inflated cost, which could have been easily reduced by retailers and still make reasonable profits.

Council also disputes arguments of FPS that our report “*could fuel importation of cheap low cost generics*”. This is totally ridiculous! All medicines whether Generic or originator are regulated. It is for the Pharmacy and the Poisons Board to act on in stemming inflow of low quality medicines.

For the information of the public and the FPS, the Council is an important stakeholder in the ongoing consultative process with the Pharmacy & Poisons Board and Ministry of Health for reforms in the pharmaceutical industry and health sector as a whole.

The Council believes that FPS should improve trade practices of pharmacists and not evade the problems by questioning the credibility of Council’s report. It is shocking that FPS is trying to cover up the issues that are fraudulent in nature.



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Premila Kumar
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