

Internet a prime venue for snake-oil sales of “health products”

The US Federal Trade Commission (FTC) is using the Internet to launch a counterattack against companies that use the same medium to gouge consumers.

In an announcement on its Web site (www.ftc.gov/opa/2001/06/cureall.ht), the FTC reports that 6 companies have been charged with making “false and unsubstantiated health and safety claims for a variety of products advertised on the Internet.” The actions were part of a “coordinated effort” that also involved the US Food and Drug Administration, Health Canada and several state governments.

The targeted companies were alleged to have been using the Internet to market supplements and other products to treat cancer, Alzheimer’s, AIDS and other diseases. “It’s bad enough when someone, with little or no evidence, touts unproven remedies to vulnerable populations such as people infected with HIV,” says Walter Carr of the National AIDS Health Fraud Task Force Network. “It’s even more frightening when they do so despite — and without so much as a mention of — emerging risks that those remedies pose. For instance, St. John’s wort and protease inhibitors — they don’t mix.”

The FTC alleges that potential purchasers have been told that they could cancel surgery and radiation or chemotherapy treatments if they bought herbal “cures.” Another company was selling a device that delivered a mild electric current that “would kill the parasites that cause such serious diseases as cancer and Alzheimer’s.”

Five of the 6 companies have already agreed to settle the charges against them. The penalties ranged from a fine of \$150 000 to an agreement to make no more unsubstantiated claims. The latter penalty was applied to the Aaron Company of Palm Bay, Florida. It claimed that one of its products, Colloidal Silver, could treat 650 diseases, including cancer and AIDS. It also said that another of its products, the Ultimate Energizer, had no side effects. It must now include a warning that it contains ephedra, “which can have dangerous effects on the central nervous system and heart and can result in serious injury.” MaxCell BioScience, a Colorado company, must pay \$150 000 to the FTC “for consumer redress.” The company, which sold dietary products

through a multilevel marketing scheme, claimed that one of its products could reverse the aging process. Charges are proceeding against a sixth company, which marketed products that it claimed would cure Alzheimer’s and other diseases and make surgery and other treatment unnecessary for cancer patients.

Danièle Dionne of Health Canada’s Health Products and Food Branch says international cooperation like this is bound to become more common in cases involving health care fraud. “In an era of globalization, it is a problem that knows no borders,” she said. — *Patrick Sullivan, CMAJ*

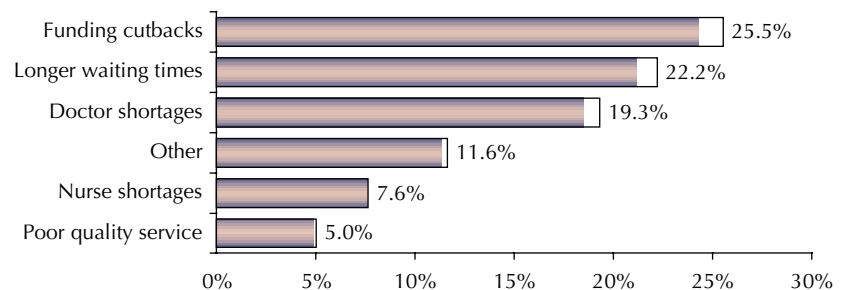
PULSE

Almost 1 in 2 Canadians says health system needs major surgery

A recent PricewaterhouseCoopers survey of Canadian adults found that 55% of respondents believe the current health care system is sound and requires only few or minor changes. On the other side, 38% believe the system has strengths but also requires major surgery, and 7% feel the system required total restructuring. Albertans and Ontarians were most likely to think the system needs little or minimal change (69%), while residents of Quebec and BC (58% and 56%) were most likely to state that the system needs major change or a total overhaul.

Almost half of those polled (47%) think the quality of health care services has declined in the past 5 years, 13% think it has improved, and the remaining 40% think it has not changed. Those who feel the system has deteriorated blame funding cutbacks (26%), longer waiting times (22%), physician shortages (19%) and nurse shortages (7.6%).

Main reasons Canadians feel health services have declined



Most Canadians think it is very important to retain each of the 5 principles in the Canada Health Act. However, the proportion who deemed the principle of public administration to be very important was, at 57%, notably lower than that for the principles of universality (86%), accessibility (81%), portability (81%) and comprehensiveness (77%).

Three-quarters of adult Canadians are willing to make some compromises to ensure that all Canadians have equal access to quality health care. The remaining 25% would approve of making some or all health services available according to a person’s ability to pay, even if this affected equality of access. — *Shelley Martin, shelley.martin@cma.ca*