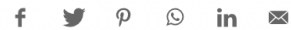


NEWS

LIBERAL MP ‘DIGS DEEP’ ON DOUBLE DISPENSING



MEGAN HAGGAN 22/05/2023



Pharmacists will all be impacted by 60-day dispensing, but every pharmacy will be impacted in its own way, one Sydney MP has been told by members of the profession

Marianne Pomeroy, co-owner of the TerryWhite Chemmart in Hornsby, Sydney, has told the *AJP* how a group of local pharmacists met with their local MP to highlight the ways in which 60-day dispensing will hit them – and how in her case, her pharmacy is unlikely to survive another blow.

Paul Fletcher, member for Bradfield – an electorate which takes in Sydney’s upper north shore – was “proactive” in taking steps to investigate pharmacists’ concerns, said Pomeroy, and reached out to meet with pharmacists. A Liberal MP and former cabinet minister, Fletcher is currently manager of Opposition Business in the House.

“He said he had received a lot of letters from his local pharmacists, and would like to organise a meeting,” Pomeroy told the *AJP*.

“He has over 40 pharmacies in his [electorate] and on top of that, lots of pharmacists that live in the area. I think everyone’s combined effort and letters of concern alerted him that this is a problem.”

Fletcher asked insightful questions about double dispensing, she said, including trying to gain a strong understanding of how pharmacies get paid. The pharmacists also were able to let him know that while the Pharmacy Guild supported tools such as the Strongroom AI 60-day dispensing calculator, it did not provide the information within it, as it uses pharmacies’ own independent data.

“He was digging deep about how it affected us. There were 18 to 20 pharmacists in the room, and he asked each and every single one of us what’s happening in our situation and in our communities.

“Everyone had something different to say. Everyone has very different businesses and pharmacy models, and obviously relies on PBS income, but everyone will be impacted in different ways.”

For example, Pomeroy’s own pharmacy is situated in a large shopping centre – and is still subject to a back payment plan after it, along with numerous other shopping centre pharmacies around the country, was hit hard by the Covid-19 pandemic.

“We’re in a shopping centre, with massive fixed overheads. With our personal situation, we wouldn’t survive [double dispensing]. We don’t have much sympathy from the landlord. We’re still coming back from Covid, where there was no traffic, and to get this next hit from the Government out of the blue, out of our control – it’s devastating,” Pomeroy said.

“We could work with the back payment, but now we get hit with this. It’s a double whammy for us.

“We also heard from new pharmacy owners who had just bought [before the double dispensing announcement was made]. They’d be insolvent after the rule is implemented.

“It was important that he see all the different types of businesses we have, and how it will impact us.”

Pomeroy said that pharmacists are not politicians, but need to work hard to correct misunderstandings by politicians, as well as some sectors of the general public, about community pharmacy.

However she said her patients have been very supportive of pharmacy over the issue.

“We look after the more vulnerable, older kind of people. If you haven’t had sickness, or a family member with sickness, and had to rely on community pharmacy, you might assume they’re all corporations,” she said.

“Australia is very lucky in that we still have our pharmacies owned by pharmacists. It adds that extra level of care you wouldn’t get otherwise, but these people think that we’re just conglomerates making millions of dollars.”

Like other pharmacists before her, she warned that pharmacies will find themselves unable to provide free services such as Webster-packing and home deliveries, due to cost.

Her own customers “get really upset” when they talk to the store’s pharmacists about 60-day dispensing, Pomeroy said.

“They ask for a bundle of brochures to take to all their friends. It’s really clear that the information, about how 60-day dispensing will impact us, isn’t out there.

“It’s really time-consuming extra work for us, to have to advocate for ourselves, but if 60-day dispensing does go through, and my business suffers, my customers will suffer. And I want them to know I’ve done everything I can to prevent this from happening.”

She urged other pharmacists to “do their bit” to help raise awareness at both the grass roots and political levels – including asking their patients to speak up.

“They have to let MPs know what their story is, because everyone’s story is different – but everyone’s going to be impacted.

“Hearing from employees, too, is powerful, as most people who work in pharmacy do so to look after people, and give value, and help their community.

“This [60-day dispensing] devalues everything they do.

“There’s a huge voice from our customers about how they rely on us for after-hours services, for free deliveries, for contacting the hospital if a discharge summary hasn’t been provided. They’re the ones saying, ‘This is what pharmacies actually do’.

“It’s a scary time to be in pharmacy. But it’s really important to do your bit and not be afraid to speak up – even though it’s not in our skillset, as pharmacists tend to go along with things and make the best of what we’ve got – and get the message out there, so that the truth comes out.”

“I met with local pharmacists who are very concerned about Albanese Government’s move to introduce 60 day dispensing,” Fletcher later wrote on Twitter.

“An informative discussion about the community health services pharmacists provide & what could be at risk given the lack of consultation before this was announced.”