

Media Release

SWALLOWING IT: FOUR CORNERS

Swallowing It: How Australians are spending billions on unproven vitamins and supplements

The figures are startling - seven out of every ten Australians take some form of vitamin or supplement. We spend more, out of our own pockets, on complementary medicines than we do on prescription drugs.

"It's very rare to meet an Australian family that doesn't have some form of vitamin supplements somewhere in the family." Australian Medical Association

Spruiked by sporting heroes, acting icons and celebrity chefs, the industry is worth over four billion dollars. But there is little evidence that many of these products actually work.

"The problem we have in Australia is that the system doesn't encourage research. You get a much more profitable return on investment from putting fifty million dollars into celebrity marketing." Academic

Many pharmacies have shelves stacked high with vitamins and supplements, prominently displayed at the front of their shops, often sold in tandem with proven pharmaceuticals.

"If they're after complementary medicines, then I'm happy to provide them." Chemist

Australians are often choosing these complementary medicines as insurance against a bad diet or to ward off sickness, but the benefits are highly contested.

"We're a nation living on tea, toast and takeaways. 90 per cent of us are deficient in our essential diets or vegetables and fruit, so of course a multivitamin plays a role." Industry Spokesperson

"What a lot of Australian families have is very expensive urine." Australian Medical Association

The spotlight is now being placed on the industry, with the regulator drafting changes to the way these products are sold and a government review examining whether or not pharmacies should stock them.

"We have had passionate community pharmacists decrying their fellow pharmacists for stocking complementary medicines, for stocking vitamins, for stocking homeopathy, for stocking products that have little, if any, medical credence." Review Panellist

The program investigates how these products are regulated and marketed in Australia and whether the credibility of chemists is threatened by selling them.

"When we look at the most trusted professions, year on year on year, I'm proud to say that at the top are doctors, nurses and pharmacists. So that respect has been hard won. That's put at risk if they're

being seen to promote treatments that increasingly the average consumer recognises might be a load of rubbish." Australian Medical Association

Swallowing It, reported by Geoff Thompson and presented by Sarah Ferguson, goes to air on Monday 13th February at 8.30pm EDT. It is replayed on Tuesday 14th February at 10.00am and Wednesday 15th at 11pm. It can also be seen on ABC News 24 on Saturday at 8.00pm AEST, ABC iview and at abc.net.au/4corners.

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For more information or to arrange an interview, please contact ABC TV's Acting News Publicist Safia van der Zwan on vanderzwan.safia@abc.net.au or 02 8333 3846.