



# Self Care in New Zealand



**A roadmap toward  
greater personal  
responsibility in  
managing health**

Prepared by the New Zealand Self  
Medication Industry Association.

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## Self Care in New Zealand: A roadmap to greater personal responsibility in managing national health.

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### What is Self Care?

Self Care describes the activities undertaken by individuals and the wider community in order to improve health, prevent disease and manage illness.

It encompasses a broad spectrum of activities and decisions that people make for themselves to maintain a good level of physical and mental health.

This can include physical exercise and sound nutrition in order to maintain good health and prevent disease, as well as using self-medication to treat and prevent illness, and managing one's health after discharge from hospital.

Self Care may be used by an individual, for instance, to treat a mild headache, or may be used in collaboration with a healthcare professional.

In that sense, Self Care may encompass a partnership between the individual and a healthcare professional such as a doctor, pharmacist, naturopath or physiotherapist.

Self Care embraces both curative and preventative health.

Treatments may involve Western mainstream medicine, complementary and alternative remedies or, as is increasingly the case, some combination of these.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) provides the following definition of Self Care:

*“Self Care refers to activities individuals, families and communities undertake with the intention of enhancing health, preventing disease, limiting illness and restoring health. These activities are derived from knowledge and skills from the pool of both professional and lay experience. They are undertaken by lay people on their own behalf either separately or in participative collaboration with professionals. Seeking professional advice in Self Care is part of the continuum of trying to maintain good health and prevent disease.”*

The notion of Self Care has gained wider acceptance in health systems in several countries and is recognised in a number of recent official New Zealand health publications.

### **Why the interest in Self Care?**

The rise of Self Care coincides with a growing interest in personal health and wellbeing, increased access to a wide range of health information, and government funded public health promotions that have targeted smoking, obesity and consumption of alcohol.

It also comes at a time when New Zealand faces a growing rate of chronic conditions such as cardiovascular disease and diabetes, often associated with excessive weight and obesity. According to the Health Care Data 2009 report, by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, New Zealand's adult obesity rate was 26.5 percent.

This compared with figures of 25 percent in 2003 and 18 percent in 1997. It was estimated there were more than 8000 preventable deaths a year related to poor nutrition and obesity and the annual cost of obesity and diabetes to the health system was estimated at \$900 million a year. In the next eight years it is forecast that the cost for Type 2 diabetes, common among obese adults, will rise to \$1.3 billion a year.

The idea that individuals should take greater responsibility for their health also fits with a growing trend of consumer empowerment, aided by increased availability of information, remedies and medicines that can improve and prolong quality of life.

Government health budgets simply cannot be sustained at current levels without significant increases in taxation to fund mounting health bills. On current projections health spend's share of GDP is expected to double by 2050 to 12 percent.

All this means that there needs to be fundamental change to entrench a powerful preventative health culture in the community, including the role of Self Care for those who are able to take greater responsibility for personal health.

### **Benefits of Self Care**

There is growing evidence to support the notion that promoting Self Care leads to a number of benefits for individuals, the community and Government through:

- Improved general health and quality of life;

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- Prevention of disease;
- Improved management and control of existing conditions;
- Increased productive life of the individual;
- Increased patient satisfaction;
- More appropriate use of GP and hospital services; and
- Reduced burden on government health and welfare services.

Already, many New Zealanders engage in some form of Self Care: sustaining a physically active, health conscious regime to maintain or restore good health; or using non-prescription medicines, nutritional supplements or treatments to address minor ailments and chronic conditions.

Even though they may be willing to embrace Self Care, most consumers will still seek the support and expertise of a general practitioner (GP), pharmacist, naturopath or other healthcare practitioner.

This idea of collaboration between the individual and healthcare professional is pivotal to effective Self Care. On the one hand it involves equipping consumers with the choices, skills and tools necessary to make their own healthcare decisions. On the other, it means giving industry and healthcare providers the tools, training and support necessary to assist all New Zealanders appropriately.

### **Self Care internationally**

In Germany, the Social Security Code contains a specific clause that sets out an obligation to “lead a health-conscious lifestyle, take precautionary health measures in good time, and actively participate in treatment and rehabilitation in order to prevent the onset of illness and disability and to overcome its consequences”. This serves as a guiding national philosophy in healthcare.

Perhaps the most extensive manifestation of Self Care has occurred in the United Kingdom, where it is a central part of country’s health system. It is incorporated at every stage of healthcare including the prevention and care of illness, symptom relief and chronic illness. It is strongly supported by the UK government.

In many countries, the impact of an ageing population, chronic preventable diseases and ballooning health budgets means that individuals are being given the tools and incentives to take great responsibility for personal health.

### The major stakeholders in Self Care

Fundamental to the success of Self Care is the formation of strong partnerships between stakeholders. Self Care does not mean consumers are left on their own; nor does it translate into “no care”.

It requires informed consumers, the expertise of pharmacists, GPs and other practitioners, provision by the healthcare industry of evidence-based products and remedies, the creation by government of a regulatory environment conducive to Self Care, and innovative approaches from private health insurers.

#### **Consumers**

Consumers, at large, cannot simply be expected to take on greater responsibility for personal health and wellbeing without guidance and leadership. This means greater encouragement and support, as well as the essential knowledge, skills and tools to undertake the task. A lack of information and knowledge can be a barrier to Self Care.

Health literacy is a critical element, not only in enabling people to make the correct health decisions but in reducing inequalities in health outcomes, particularly in low access communities.

For many consumers, the GP is the first point of call, yet not all ailments need the attention of a GP. Recent research has outlined the significant impact that minor ailments impose on GP workload.

The IMS study entitled “**Minor Ailment Workload in General Practice**” carried out in the UK in June 2008 found that:

- 57 million GP consultations per annum involve minor ailments.
- 90 percent of these consultations are for minor ailments alone.
- 91 percent of minor ailments consultations result in a prescription, at a cost of 370 million pounds.
- The total NHS resource cost devoted to treatment of minor ailments is 2 billion pounds.

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- 20 percent of GP consultations involve minor ailments; 18 percent for minor ailments alone.

Similar IMS research in Australia in November 2008 (*“Minor Ailment Workload in General Practice”*) found that 15 percent of all GP consultations involve the treatment of minor ailments, and seven percent involve the treatment of minor ailments alone.

These studies raise the need to examine alternatives to GP consultations for minor ailments and other conditions that can be more appropriately managed once diagnosed.

### ***Government***

A major responsibility of government is to create a policy environment in which Self Care forms an integral part of a national health policy and where all stakeholders work to develop strategies to give effect to these policies. This should include emphasis on, and investment in, health promotion and disease prevention.

Authorities responsible for the availability of medicine, such as PHARMAC and Medsafe, need to encourage an environment that supports access to evidence-based non-prescription medicines and complementary and alternative medicines.

There is a case for wider access to prescription medicines with an extended safe record of use by switching these to non-prescription status, particularly those targeting the treatment and prevention of preventable conditions identified in the Government’s Health Targets.

Improved partnerships between government and other stakeholders, including industry, have the capacity to generate positive outcomes through sharing of resources, personnel and data.

### ***Healthcare professionals***

The move towards greater Self Care will necessitate a cultural change in the relationships between healthcare professionals and patients and between the different healthcare professions – GPs and pharmacists in particular – towards sharing clinical management of patients.

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GPs will remain the first option for many with more serious ailments but many minor ailments do respond to effective Self Care in consultation with a pharmacist, natural healthcare provider or treatment by a nurse practitioner.

If professionals are to play an active role in Self Care, new policies are needed to define these roles. Skills training is critical because Self Care involves a cultural shift from professionals being the principal providers of care (and patients as passive recipients) towards more emphasis on shared care, preventive care, healthy lifestyle and patient involvement in their own care of minor, acute and long-term conditions.

Self Care opens up the choice of a range of health professionals as consumers exercise their choice based upon enhanced knowledge and empowerment. This includes GPs, pharmacists, naturopaths, nurses, psychologists, physiotherapists and dieticians, among others.

### ***Healthcare industry***

New Zealand's proposed National Medicines Policy will provide the formal legislative framework to govern timely access to medicines that are affordable and meet appropriate standards of quality, safety and efficacy.

The new policy will help define industry's role and responsibilities in the shift towards increased personal responsibility.

Industry will be required to continue to provide timely access to medicines that are safe, efficacious and of a high quality at affordable prices. The expansion of Self Care will increase the demand for a broader range of solutions – demand that should be met through product innovation and wider access to safe, effective treatments.

The healthcare industry will need to work with healthcare professionals, relevant professional bodies and patient groups to ensure consistency of message and information. As patients become more involved in the management of their conditions, there will be a need for new and different types of consumer information. Responsible advertising and communication will be central to the goal of raising disease awareness and encouraging self-management.

Training for health professionals will become a significantly bigger issue for industry. Product-specific treatment guidelines will need to be proactively developed in

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cooperation with the professional bodies for us by pharmacists and other healthcare professionals as well as by consumers.

The wider industry will also be required to demonstrate that consumers have the necessary information and access to advice to ensure that products can be used appropriately without close medical supervision.

### ***Private health insurers***

The private health insurance industry has a key role to play in helping to develop a system architecture that contains the right mix of incentives to alter behaviour in favour of Self Care. Already there are a range of payments and rewards available in New Zealand for people who avoid risk-taking behaviour such as quitting smoking, and who make positive lifestyle changes.

More evidence is emerging that simple and cheaper prevention strategies can be at least as cost-efficient as more expensive interventions, for example, the use of calcium and vitamin D in the prevention of fractures in osteoporosis.

As healthcare costs escalate, there must, of necessity, be an increased focus on innovative ways of encouraging individuals and families to adopt healthy alternatives in order to prevent longer term, costly and often traumatic medical interventions.

## **Self Care – a pathway to improved national health**

As New Zealand's national health bill continues to rise under the weight of technological advances and an ageing population, policy makers seek solutions that are affordable, practical and will have lasting impact. One thing is clear; the current system design is not financially sustainable.

Self Care has the capacity, based upon its spread elsewhere, to form part of a broad sweep of measures that can address New Zealand's health issues. It is one of the demonstrably proven policy reforms that can ease the pressures falling on GPs, hospitals and government resources, at the same time providing better health, enhanced wellbeing and greater satisfaction for all New Zealanders.

## **About NZSMI**

The New Zealand Self-Medication Industry Association (NZSMI) is the industry body representing the “Over the Counter” (OTC) manufacturers and suppliers based in New Zealand. It is the equivalent body to the RMI, who represent the pharmaceutical manufacturers and suppliers.

NZSMI has been operating for 17 years in New Zealand (formerly known as the Non-Prescription Medicine Association). The organization represents approximately 85 percent of the companies selling, marketing or distributing “over the counter” medicines in this country.

The goals and objectives of the organization are four-fold:

1. Promote and advance the understanding of Self Care in relation to Self-Medication.
2. Work with Medsafe to provide safe, efficacious, affordable and widely available OTC medicines within the boundaries of a risk/benefit philosophy.
3. Provide information and advice to all stakeholders.
4. Ensure a growing and healthy membership by providing relevant member services.

[www.nzsmi.org.nz](http://www.nzsmi.org.nz)