



Contact: Cindy Karra
202-974-5009

Surgeon General Calls on Public To “Be MedWise”
About Over-the-Counter Medicines
*Issues “Prescription” As Tool For Talking to Pharmacists, Other
Health Professionals About These Medicines*

Washington, D.C.; September 10, 2003 -- At a time when Americans have access to more than 100,000 different over-the-counter medicines, a broad-based coalition of health-related organizations is working with the U.S. Surgeon General to help consumers understand and use these products appropriately.

At a Washington press conference today, Surgeon General Richard H. Carmona, M.D., M.P.H., joined with the National Council on Patient Information and Education (NCPPIE) and the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) to unveil a new ***Be MedWise Prescription for Taking OTC Medicines***, the centerpiece of a pharmacy-based education campaign that will reach consumers when they are thinking about nonprescription medicines and making their purchasing decisions.

Intended as a complement to NCPPIE’s ongoing *Be MedWise* campaign about the safe use of OTC medicines, Dr. Carmona’s “prescription” -- a list of important questions to ask the pharmacist about the selection and appropriate use of OTC medicines -- will be distributed widely through community pharmacies, clinics, and community/senior centers, and supported by a national advertising campaign. Coming at a time when Americans buy more than five billion OTC drug products a year, NCPPIE will use this educational tool as a way to raise awareness that OTC drugs are serious medicines that must be taken with care.

"By improving the health literacy of Americans we can improve our nation's overall health," Surgeon General Carmona said. "This information, combined with an ongoing dialogue between consumers and pharmacists, will enable more Americans to get the most benefit from their over-the-counter medicines."

Dr. Carmona’s ***Be MedWise Prescription*** is especially timely, now that consumers have access to an FDA-mandated “Drug Facts” label that provides essential information about each OTC medicine in a standardized format. Patterned after the “Nutrition Facts” label, the “Drug Facts” label clearly spells out each OTC product’s active ingredients, the purpose of the medication, uses and specific warnings, dosage instructions and the medicine’s inactive ingredients. Most OTC medicines manufactured after May 2002 now carry this label.

-More-

Making the connection between FDA's labeling requirements and the Surgeon General's educational efforts, FDA Commissioner Mark B. McClellan, M.D., Ph.D. said: "Providing useful information that helps Americans make wise choices when selecting and using medicines is among FDA's top priorities. With the Surgeon General's new call to action, we can take the 'Drug Facts' label to the next level by involving pharmacists in one-on-one education about how to select the most appropriate OTC medicines so consumers will understand each drug's risks and benefits more easily."

New Survey Highlights Progress; Shows Continuing Need for OTC Education

The Surgeon General's "prescription" coincides with the release of new survey data about how and when Americans take OTC medicines. Conducted for NCPIE by Harris Interactive in June 2003, this national poll of 1,009 adults finds that:

- More than half of those polled (51 percent) report having taken an OTC medicine and a prescription drug simultaneously. This can be a problem because some prescription medicines contain the same active ingredient as commonly used over-the-counter medicines.
- Almost half of those surveyed (48 percent) say they have taken more than the recommended dose of a nonprescription medicine. Among people who say they exceed the recommended dose of an OTC medicine, 35 percent say they take the next dose sooner than directed; 32 percent take more than the recommended amount at a single time; and 18 percent report taking the medicine more times during the day than recommended on the label.

When it comes to label information, NCPIE's survey charts some encouraging trends about how and when consumers use OTC labels. Compared with findings NCPIE reported in early 2002, this year's poll shows that while consumers tend to use OTC label information selectively, nearly three in five respondents (56 percent) are aware of the "Drug Facts" label; 44 percent say they look for the active ingredient (up from 34 percent in 2002), 20 percent seek out possible side effects (compared to 10 percent in 2002), and 23 percent (compared to 16 percent in 2002) report reading dosage information when buying a nonprescription product. Eight percent say they don't read anything on the label.

The NCPIE survey also finds that many consumers don't seek the advice of a practicing pharmacist, even though pharmacists are specially trained to counsel consumers about OTC medicines. According to the survey, only four in ten consumers (43 percent) now consult a pharmacist about nonprescription medicines. Despite this reluctance, most Americans say they would buy a particular OTC medicine based on their pharmacist's recommendation (80 percent), or not purchase a specific OTC drug if their pharmacist advised against it (82 percent).

-More-

“An important message of the *Be MedWise* campaign is to encourage more Americans to seek out the advice of pharmacists and other health professionals about how to minimize the risks and maximize the benefits when taking OTC medicines – alone or in combination with prescription medicines they may be taking,” said Ray Bullman, NCPIE’s Executive Vice President. “Through this campaign, we want Americans to know that pharmacists are accessible, and are willing to answer their questions.”

New *Be MedWise* Pharmacy Initiative, Public Service Spot

To help consumers when they have questions about OTC medicines, the *Be MedWise* campaign will work with the Office of the Surgeon General, the FDA and leading national pharmacy organizations to disseminate Dr. Carmona’s “prescription” through community pharmacies, clinics, and community/senior centers nationwide. Signed by the Surgeon General, this educational tool provides consumers with some important questions to ask their pharmacist or another healthcare professional when they need additional help in selecting or using an OTC medicine:

- What over-the-counter (OTC) medicines are available for the symptoms I want to treat?
- How much of this OTC medicine should I take at a time?
- How often should I take this OTC medicine?
- How many days in a row should I use this medicine to treat my symptoms?
- What other medicines (OTC and prescription), herbal products or dietary supplements should I avoid while taking this OTC medicine?

At the same time, NCPIE is stepping up its ongoing OTC education campaign with new television and radio announcements, a brochure printed in English and Spanish, and new information on the campaign’s Web site – www.bemedwise.org. Of special significance is a new :30 second public service spot that will air on television stations this fall. Produced by NCPIE in cooperation with FDA, the spot urges caution for people using OTC and prescription medicines that contain the same active ingredients.

About *Be MedWise*/NCPIE

Launched in January 2002, the *Be MedWise* campaign employs a wide variety of media channels – the mass media, print and broadcast advertising, the Internet and consumer education materials – to help Americans select and use OTC medicines wisely. Coinciding with the recent move to a standardized “Drug Facts” label on the majority of nonprescription drugs, the campaign features a supporting Web site – www.bemedwise.org – where consumers, health professionals, educators, and the media can get detailed information about the OTC label and how to compare products, learn about dosages, and understand information about specific warnings. The program is currently supported through unrestricted educational grants from Procter & Gamble Health Sciences Institute and McNeil Consumer & Specialty Pharmaceuticals.

-More-

Established in 1982, the National Council on Patient Information and Education is a diverse non-profit coalition that works to stimulate and improve the communication of information about the appropriate use of prescription and OTC medicines, such as through “Talk About Prescriptions” Month every October. NCPIE’s members include consumer organizations: patient advocacy groups; voluntary health agencies; health professional associations, schools of pharmacy, nursing, and dentistry; health-related trade associations; prescription and over-the-counter pharmaceutical manufacturers; and local, state and federal government agencies. More information about NCPIE is available through its Web site: www.talkaboutrx.org.

#####