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## Probe on vitamins from GPs

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THE consumer watchdog will be asked to investigate claims that doctors are exploiting their patients by buying vitamins at wholesale prices and selling them on for massive profits.

The Australian Competition and Consumer Commission investigation would focus on what the Australian Medical Association has described as the "ethical minefield" of the interface between complementary and conventional medicine.

Federal Parliamentary Secretary for Health Christopher Pyne announced the planned investigation yesterday after complaints about a lack of legal guidelines for the sale of complementary medicines by doctors.

Sunshine Coast general practitioner Scott Masters told The Australian he knew of a doctor practising nutritional medicine who had confessed to buying \$10,000 worth of vitamin E at the start of each year and then selling it on to patients for a total of \$100,000.

"That's not a bad mark-up," Dr Masters said. "This is entirely legal, although there are major ethical concerns about conflict of interest."

Dr Masters said his practice received an increasing amount of material from the promoters of supplements.

"I can sell all these products directly to patients at a mark-up I consider reasonable," he said.

The danger of doctors having financial interests in a product was that they might fail to prescribe a medicine that actually treated their patients' complaints.

Dr Masters said the community was right to be concerned about pharmaceutical companies attempting to influence doctors to prescribe particular drugs.

But too little attention was focused on the way in which producers of complementary medicines sought to influence doctors.

Mr Pyne said the ACCC was reviewing the code of conduct of the pharmaceutical industry after claims of inducements being offered to doctors.

"I have inquired as to whether they have a similar code of conduct for the complementary medicines sector and they do not," Mr Pyne said.

"I will be writing to Chris Pearce, who is the relevant parliamentary secretary for this area, and will ask him to ask the ACCC to conduct a review of these practices with a view to the ACCC recommending a code of conduct similar to that applying to pharmaceuticals."

AMA national president Mukesh Haikerwal said doctors selling vitamins represented a clear conflict of interest.

"These things are covered by the general code of ethics," Dr Haikerwal said.

The chair of the AMA's ethics committee, Rosanna Capolingua, said practitioners must at all times declare pecuniary interests in the sale of products and not mislead their patients.

"The whole thrust of the AMA code of ethics is to ensure that perverse incentives remain foreign to the patient-doctor relationship," Dr Capolingua wrote in a recent letter to the Medical Journal of Australia.

"I share his (Dr Masters) concerns about the ethical minefield that lurks in the interface between complementary and conventional medicine."

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