

# International Internet Sweep Day

More than 60 law enforcement agencies and health associations from 25 countries joined forces on 10 September to sweep the Internet for website advertisements promoting healthcare products or treatments that make outlandish claims for cures

This was the second annual international Internet sweep day and was coordinated by the ACCC as an initiative of the International Marketing Supervision Network (IMSN), an informal network of consumer law enforcement agencies around the world.

Preliminary results suggest the sweep will prove more successful than last year's — which was the first coordinated event and targeted get-rich-quick sites. The first sweep bagged 1100 suspicious sites, 297 of which disappeared after being challenged (some via prosecutions).

This year's sweep focused on sites containing claims for wonder cures and treatments for serious diseases such as heart disease, cancer, HIV/AIDS, diabetes, arthritis and multiple sclerosis. For example one was found that offers 'permanent relief from diabetes, guaranteed to have no side effects and proved safe'.

Others were even more outrageous with one product claiming to cure conditions where people have 'no bones' and 'bad looks'.

Consumers around the world waste billions of dollars every year on unproven, fraudulently marketed, and useless healthcare products and treatments. Some of these could cause serious harm or endanger lives, especially if consumers decide to discontinue prescribed medication.

Internet commerce is booming worldwide but, just like in old methods of commerce, there are those who are only too willing to exploit other people's hopes and fears.

The ACCC, the driving force behind the sweeps, chose 'miracle cures' for this year's focus after receiving complaints, primarily through the Slam-a-Scam facility on its website where consumers can alert it to suspicious sites.

The results of the sweep will be highlighted at the Sydney Global Commerce Conference to be held on 9–11 November. (See page 9 for details.)



Hank Spier (left) with Hong Kong Consumer Council officials

## Hong Kong's haul

The ACCC's general manager, Hank Spier, was in Hong Kong on 10 September, partly to help launch the Hong Kong Consumer Council's first participation in the international sweep.

The council was enthusiastic about its haul. It found 45 websites pushing misleading and potentially harmful health claims and offering miracle cures. The council referred them to the Hong Kong Department of Health for follow up.