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Fury over drug reform response

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HEALTH experts are furious at what they regard as a weak response by the Gillard government to several long-running reviews of Australia's drug regulator, describing the announcement as a wasted opportunity that will fail to give the body more teeth.

The Therapeutic Goods Administration has been under fire in recent years over a succession of regulatory scandals, triggering complaints that it is too slow and ineffectual in tackling cowboy companies and that its processes promote confusion.

But in a combined response yesterday to seven reviews or official reports on the regulatory system, the federal government rejected or delayed recommendations by its own commissioned working groups, pushing off key

reforms such as tougher penalties for further consultation.

Ken Harvey, a member of one of the working groups and a long-standing campaigner for tougher regulation, particularly of dubious complementary products, said a key recommendation of his working group had been rejected. The recommendation would require companies to sign up to an existing voluntary code of conduct when they listed a new product with the TGA. Its rejection tore up the only mechanism for preventing companies ignoring codes by refusing to join the peak bodies that promulgate them.

This was the issue in 2009 when generic drug-maker Sigma rejected criticisms of a doctors' 10-day Mediterranean cruise on the grounds that it did not belong to Medicines Australia and could not be bound by its code, which the trip breached.

Dr Harvey said that he was so

disgusted with yesterday's announcement that he resigned his ALP membership on the spot.

"I can no longer be a member of the Labor Party when a Labor government fails to implement unanimous recommendations from its own working parties and continues to procrastinate after a decade of calls for effective sanctions," said Dr Harvey, who stood unsuccessfully as a Labor candidate for the federal seat of Koo-ya-ong in 2007.

He said the failings outweighed a number of positive outcomes in the government's response, including the creation of an advisory council and tighter regulation of artificial joints.

Parliamentary Secretary for Health Catherine King rejected the criticisms last night, saying the government had accepted the need for clearer labelling and tougher penalties, but further work was required.