

Herbal medicine on the brink!

6th October 2009, Chipping Norton, Oxon, Herbal medicine is under threat. The public could soon lose access to many herbal medicines currently available. Herbalists and their suppliers might have to close down if – as now seems likely – the Government fails to introduce statutory regulation of practitioners - as it has for osteopaths and chiropractors.

Worse still, unscrupulous backstreet traders will still be able to sell potentially dangerous herbal medicines to the public via dubious internet sites. And more people are likely to risk buying in this way because professional herbalists will not be allowed to provide their patients with many well-established remedies.

In 2011 a new European law will ban the sale of all herbal medicines except licensed "traditional" herbal remedies for "mild and self-limiting" illness. Many of the herbal medicines currently prescribed by herbalists will have to be withdrawn as practitioners will lose the right to prescribe herbal medicines from reputable third-party producers and manufacturers. This problem can only be solved by the statutory regulation of professional herbalists.

This is why, after years of dilly-dallying, the Government is now carrying out a public consultation into statutory regulation – but with questions so difficult few people can answer them

The first asks: *'What is the evidence of harm . . . What is its likelihood and severity?'* Others ask for estimates of costs, the "regulatory burden" and alternatives to statutory regulation. One even suggests there is no evidence base for herbal medicine: a claim that is patently untrue and absurd.

Herbalist Michael McIntyre, Stakeholder Chair on the Department of Health's Committee that recently recommended statutory regulation for herbalists and acupuncturists and Chairman of the European Herbal and Traditional Medicine Practitioners' Association, says:

"Patients are telling herbalists around the country that they have tried to respond to the consultation questionnaire – but are unable to do so. You would need to be an expert in medicines law or regulation to answer most of the questions.

"This is the second Government consultation on regulation of herbal medicine. The first, published in 2005, received an overwhelming response in favour. Perhaps this time, they want to make it more difficult for ordinary patients to get a say."

The Department of Health consultation questionnaire can be found at:
http://www.info.doh.gov.uk/questionnaire/ahmtcm_consultion.nsf

EHTPA is encouraging all those who have been unable to respond to contact their MP, and to let EHTPA know too, by emailing gail.breeze@ehpa.eu.

-ENDS-

Notes to editors:

1. *Severe threat to safe herbal choices*, an EHTPA Briefing Paper, is available to journalists on request. For more information and for interviews with **Michael McIntyre**, please contact 07989 301963. Also available for interview is **Professor Michael Pittilo**, Chair of the DH Working Group on statutory regulation of herbal/traditional medicine, acupuncture and TCM contact 01224 262001 and **Simon Mills**, former Special Advisor to the House of Lords' Select Committee (that recommended statutory regulation in 2000) contact 07768 377 397.
2. The full Department of Health consultation report can be found at: http://www.dh.gov.uk/en/Consultations/Liveconsultations/DH_103567
Access the full EHTPA response at its website <http://www.ehpa.eu/>.
3. The European Herbal and Traditional Medicine Practitioners Association (EHTPA) was founded in 1993 when it became clear that, with the development of the European Union, the legislative framework under which herbal medicine was practised in the UK and Europe was likely to undergo radical change. It represents professional associations of herbal/traditional medicine practitioners offering variously western herbal medicine, Chinese herbal medicine, Ayurveda and traditional Tibetan medicine. The EHTPA is dedicated to the development of herbal/traditional medicine, preserving and enhancing its legal basis across the EU and promoting best practice.
4. Michael McIntyre has practised herbal medicine for 30 years. He works from his clinic in the Cotswolds, and has been EHTPA chairman since 1993. He was a Stakeholder Chair on the Department of Health *Steering Group on the Statutory Regulation of Practitioners of Acupuncture, Herbal Medicine, Traditional Chinese Medicine and Other Traditional Medicine Systems Practised in the UK*.
5. The statutory regulation of practitioners of herbal medicine and acupuncture was recommended by the House of Lords' Select Committee for Science and Technology in their report: *Complementary and Alternative Medicine* (2000). Three Department of Health Working Parties since then have also recommended statutory regulation, most recently through the: *Report to Ministers from The Department of Health Steering Group on the Statutory Regulation of Practitioners of Acupuncture, Herbal Medicine, Traditional Chinese Medicine and Other Traditional Medicine Systems Practised in the UK*, chaired by Professor Michael Pittilo, Vice-Chancellor of Robert Gordon University. It can be found at: http://www.dh.gov.uk/en/Publicationsandstatistics/Publications/PublicationsPolicyAndGuidance/DH_086359
6. The Department of Health carried out a public consultation into the statutory regulation of herbal medicine and acupuncture in 2004. It received 698 responses, the overwhelming majority in favour of statutory regulation. A report on this consultation was published in 2005. In its response, the government accepted the case for regulation and committed itself to a timetable that should have seen regulation in place later that year.