

Natural medicines – the safest way to avoid death

A report just released by the Acting Chair of the Coroner's Council has shown natural medicines have the lowest fatality rate of all medical treatments in this country.

Despite extensive research, coroner Dr Wallace Bain found no deaths have occurred in this country due to natural medicines such as vitamins, minerals and herbal products.

Dr Bain, who is also a trained pharmacist and lawyer, undertook the study in light of growing opposition to new legislation that will see New Zealand's natural health industry come under Australian laws.

The safety of natural products is often cited as a reason for the need for such a move.

The Labour government plans that the Australia New Zealand Therapeutic Products Authority (ANZTPA) will soon replace the current Medsafe agency as part of a 'trans-Tasman harmonisation' push. Opponents fear this move will decimate New Zealand's natural health industry as has already occurred in Australia.

At present lack of support from New Zealand First, the Maori and Green parties is the only thing stopping the legislation coming into effect.

Says Dr Bain: "In my capacity as Acting Chair of the Coroner's Council, I enquired of all Coroners as to whether or not from a search of their Coronial findings they could find any instances where there had been a problem with any of these natural products.

"They were asked to provide any information from inquests where these products had been involved whether or not a death had resulted. At the same time the Coronial records held by the Ministry of Justice in Wellington were searched at my request by ministry staff."

Dr Bain's study returned a finding of zero deaths from natural remedies.

His only findings were:

- A three-year-old child who choked to death on a vitamin tablet in 2003 that was too large for the child to swallow
- A woman who terminated her third pregnancy after a scan showed the foetus had spina bifida. The woman had been taking 300mg of folic acid a day rather than the recommended 800mg per day
- A man who died from non-viral hepatitis of unknown origin who also had a pre-existing prostate cancer condition. The man had been taking an Indian herbal product K4. The Coroner's report said despite no certainty of a link with the herbal product, the remedy such be banned until more was known about its effects on liver toxicity
- Some ongoing inquests into party pills

In contrast, deaths in 1998 (the last year of detailed official statistics available) caused by adverse reactions to pharmaceutical drugs killed 1524 New Zealanders and deaths associated with medical injury (mistakes by doctors and medical staff) killed 4222 New Zealanders.

Says Dr Bain: “A recent Australian study shows that 1 in 10 patients presenting to a general practitioner had an adverse pharmaceutical drug event in the preceding six months with 50% of those being in the moderate to severe range and 8% requiring hospitalisation.

“A New Zealand study reported in July of 2006 and referred to Parliament’s Health Committee pointed to previous research suggesting problems such as hospital acquired infection, drug error and staff mistakes are costing this country around \$870 million a year. This prompted the Health Minister to ensure that District Health Boards gave priority to reducing such adverse events – most clearly identified as being drug induced.”

Also in Dr Bain’s report is mention of a US study that puts complications resulting from medication errors in American hospitals at \$US1.5 billion dollars per year. Studies also show that prescription drug errors double a person’s risk of dying in hospital. Another study put the cost of a single adverse drug event to a hospital in the US at \$US2,500.

“The estimate of costs incurred by US hospitals as a result of drug-related injury or death was put at \$US76.6 billion which was three times the cost of all diabetes care in the United States,” says Dr Bain.

“What is ironic here is that what is being held out as a justification for high regulation and compliance in the area of complementary medicines and natural products in New Zealand is public safety and risk. Despite a diligent search of Coronial records and the literature, no instances have been found to demonstrate that in fact these products have any serious public health issue or risk.

“The problem is clearly with prescription and other drugs,” says Dr Bain. “The Coronial and literature searches in so far as natural products are concerned and linkages to public safety and risk can be described legally as *De minimis no curat lex*. That is – of minimal risk importance.

“The law does not and should not concern itself with such trifles.”

Dr Bain’s report has been sent to Annette King.

Like to interview Dr Bain? Please contact Kimberley Paterson on 09 4244218 or kimberleypaterson@paradise.net.nz

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