

Herbal medicines: 'Natural' not necessarily 'safe'



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Herbal remedies have been around for centuries, but with increasing numbers of people turning to alternative 'medicines', many countries are bringing in regulations to improve the safety of the patients who use them.

'Herbal medicines' – those which are presented as having properties for treating or preventing disease in human beings – include herbs, herbal materials and preparations, and finished products that contain parts of plants or plant materials as active ingredients.

They appeal to a variety of people, some of whom are simply distrustful of conventional medicines and the chemicals within them, and others who feel alternative remedies more closely match their culture or belief system. In some Asian and African countries, 80% of the population depend on herbal medicines for primary health care. Whilst personal choice remains important, most would agree that patients need to be able to make an informed choice about any product that purports to have medicinal qualities.

Some herbal remedies have very powerful effects, and without the necessary information patients might not realise that in some instances they should not take conventional medicines and herbal prod-

ucts side-by-side. Ginkgo and ginseng, for example, are known to have a similar effect to the blood-thinning drug Warfarin, while one of the more popular herbal products, St John's Wort, can interfere with the contraceptive pill.

A look through the list of banned products that the UK Medicines & Healthcare Products Regulatory Agency (MHRA) have on their website is quite concerning when one considers that many of these had been freely available for years without any consideration for their possible side-effects. They include a number of traditional Indian and Chinese medicines, including teas which are now illegal to import into the UK. The Saudi Food and Drug Administration (SFDA) have similarly banned the sale and distribution of a traditional Chinese tea after samples were found to contain excessive levels of pesticides.

Until last year the UK industry had been covered by the 1968 Medicines Act, drawn up when only a few herbal remedies were seen to be conventional medicines. Due to the gradual increase in the popularity of these products however, new European Union rules came into effect on 30th April 2011. The European Traditional Herbal Medicinal Products Directive established a regulatory approval process for herbal medicines in the EU, requiring each EU member state to set up a traditional herbal registration scheme for manufactured herbal medicines that are suitable for use without medical supervision.

Companies are no longer able to sell manufactured unlicensed herbal medicines unless they have an appropriate product licence – either a full marketing authorisation based on the safety, quality and efficacy of the product (as with any regular medicine), or a traditional herbal registration (THR) based on the safety, quality and evidence of traditional use of the product.

Looking specifically to the Middle East, the UAE is an example of a country that has a long history in the use of traditional medicines. It was also one of the first countries

to set up regulatory procedures for natural medicines when in 2008 the Government decided that all natural products – vitamins, minerals, herbs – must be approved by the Ministry of Health. The opening of the Zayed Complex for Herbal Research & Traditional Medicine (ZCHRTM) was seen by many as vital for the development of the registration and integration of herbal products into the healthcare system.

In essence, consumers need to bear in mind that as with any conventional drug, herbal medicines should always be taken with care. This is particularly so where the safety of a herbal product has not been established in certain key groups such as pregnant women, children and the elderly. Phrases like 'natural', 'herbal' and 'derived from plants' do not necessarily mean safe. Many plants can be poisonous to humans, and indeed many pharmaceuticals have been developed from plants using the powerful compounds they contain.

It's good to see that in recent years regulation and safety awareness programmes about herbal products has grown in many countries. For those patients that want a choice there is certainly a place for conventional medicines and herbal medicines to live side-by-side. Patient safety and information however have to be key considerations for regulatory authorities before any product is allowed for sale. **MEH**

Durbin PLC is a British company based in South Harrow, London. Established in 1963, the company specialises in supplying quality assured pharmaceuticals, medical equipment and consumable supplies to healthcare professionals and aid agencies in over 180 countries. As well as reacting rapidly to emergency situations, Durbin PLC responds to healthcare supply needs from local project level to national scale programmes.
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