

Conventional Medicine Far Riskier Than Supplements

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The panic over the blanket recall of alternative treatments manufactured by Pan Pharmaceuticals was way out of proportion to the facts.

Hands up if you threw out all your vitamins last month just to be on the safe side, after it was discovered that the Australian Company Pan Pharmaceuticals had serious deficiencies in manufacturing and quality control.

When the dust settled, though, just one product from Pan, an over-the-counter travel sickness tablet, had caused harm. But the tarnish quickly spread to the supplement industry as a whole, as a blanket recall caused people to doubt not only the effectiveness of vitamins and supplements but their safety.

We may have been looking in the wrong direction. While the Pan medication put 19 Australians in hospital, and others suffered unspecified harmful reactions, there were no reports of such incidents in New Zealand. At least not relating to legally produced vitamins and supplements, even though an estimated half of New Zealanders take them.

Rather according to the Ministry of Health, more than 650 New Zealanders die each year from highly preventable reactions to pharmaceutical medicines (in the United States the number exceeds 106,000).

So given that no one has died in New Zealand from taking legal, over-the-counter supplements, and harmful reactions are rare, why the disproportionate media fuss over Pan Pharmaceuticals?

And why the calls to increase regulation of an industry that already has more than 20 acts, regulations and codes of practice in place. And why the advisory from the ministry telling people to discard their supplements if they were at all unsure?

If you ask alternative medicine proponents, they'll relate a saga that sounds like a conspiracy theory gone wild: from manipulation of the media by the pharmaceutical industry to overt and covert efforts to flout law, discredit and otherwise damage the reputation of natural remedies.

They talk even of pharmaceutical companies taking over the nutritional supplements market and working to reduce the legal potency of products so as to make them ineffective.

After all, the alternative practitioners argue, the global pharmaceutical industry is the most profitable on earth and depends on a steady supply of sick people. It all sounds ridiculous, right?

Not according to the latest edition of the British Medical Journal. It's entirely devoted to claims that patients and governments are being systematically misled by pharmaceutical companies. Its dissection of the industry reveals how research is being compromised, and exposes the tactics used to promote new drugs and the relationships between the world's leading pharmaceutical companies and supposedly independent medical journals and family doctors.

Then there's the dietary Supplement Safety Bill being introduced in the US. Backed by the pharmaceutical industry, the legislation, if passed, will effectively medicalise the dietary supplement industry, forcing most manufacturers out of business, allowing a pharmaceutical take over of the industry.

Or the Codex Alimentarius Commission, Run by the United Nations. Codex is empowered to set standards of operation for the health industry. Strangely, 90% of representation is from multinational pharmaceutical corporations but the supplement industry and the general public are barred from attending.

Codex is working to control such things as the sale of dietary supplements for preventative or therapeutic reasons and the potency of natural remedies. It also seeks to convert definitions of many supplements to drugs and to make its rules binding on every UN member nation.

In Germany and Norway, where the Codex proposals are already enshrined in law, even Vitamin C (above 200 mg) is illegal, except by prescription and then only from the pharmaceutical company that supplies the medical system. But first you need to have convinced your doctor that you need it.

All this is happening despite recent reports such as that from Harvard University on the prevention of cancer of the colon. The longitudinal study of nearly 100,000 nurses over 20 years shows that folic acid supplements reduce cancer of the colon by a huge 75 to 80 %.

At the same time, the John Hopkins Medical Center's nutrition department has stated that, based on studies where people take a supplement, Vitamin E seems to reduce risk of some cancers by 60 to 70 % and the risk of heart disease by 80 to 90 %.

But perhaps the pharmaceutical industry, despite its power, is just a little worried. Last week the New York Times reported that the Pharmaceuticals Research and Manufacturers of America would increase its lobbying budget by 23% to US\$150 million (259 million) in the coming year. Its budget includes more than US\$2.5 million for such things as "intellectual echo chambers of economists and thought leaders" (read journalists), and for the placement of articles by third parties and media relations

consultants.

The agency also set aside US\$ 12.3 million to develop coalitions and strategic alliances with doctors, patients, universities and influential members of minority groups. Pinch me, I am dreaming. Doesn't this sound evil to you?

The bottom line is that you're 26,000 times more likely to die from properly researched, regulated, prescribed and used drugs than dietary supplements. Whether those supplements are effective, preventative measures, you will have to decide for yourself. But somehow the behaviour of the pharmaceutical companies makes me suspicious that the researchers at Harvard and John Hopkins and all those vitamin and mineral advocates might be right after all.

So just to be on the safe side, I'm taking my vitamins-- while I can still get them.