

Lord Taverne writes for ePolitix.com ahead of a House of Lords question on the regulation of astrology

My parliamentary question about regulating astrologers is inspired by the government's proposed statutory regulation of alternative medicine.

The government proposes to regulate practitioners of acupuncture, herbal medicine, traditional Chinese medicine and other traditional medicine systems.

This is clearly a response to intense lobbying by Prince Charles' Foundation for Integrated Medicine.

The proposal is strongly opposed by Sense About Science (of which I am chairman), the Medical Research Council, the Academy of Medical Royal Colleges, the Institute of Biomedical science, the Medical Schools Council, the Physiological Society and the Royal College of Pathologists.

It would give practitioners of alternative medicine a spurious respectability, as being sanctioned by official regulation, which implies that their practices are evidence-based when there is little if any scientific evidence in their support.

They offer accounts of basic physiology and pharmacology that are highly implausible. In fact, they have about as much scientific basis as astrology. So why not add parapsychologists or astrologers to the list?

In defence of alternative medicine systems, it is argued that they are popular.

But astrology is even more popular. In fact, pseudo-science generally is fashionable.

Several universities actually give 'science' degrees in homeopathy, ayurveda and reflexology and other forms of alternative medicine.

It is also argued that many of the practices must be effective because they have been around for centuries.

So has witchcraft, or the belief that prayer can cure disease. But medicine is not like a piece of antique furniture, which becomes more valuable with age.

If the government is worried about patient safety it should require practitioners of alternative medicine to undergo conventional medical training.

It should take a firm stand in favour of science-based policy, not appear to legitimise quackery.