

A tragedy that should have been avoided

February 12th 2010

Two years ago, herbalists warned the Health Minister in person that failing to put full, statutory regulation in place would inevitably lead to a tragedy. Without it, the public has no protection from untrained, bogus practitioners and dodgy herbal products.

Now a heart-breaking case may have proved them right.

The Central Criminal Court at the Old Bailey has heard how civil servant Patricia Booth suffered cancer and her kidneys were “destroyed” after taking pills alleged to have been provided by a Chinese medicine shop. Prosecutors say they contained a banned ingredient called *Aristolochia fangchi*. This produces an acid that is toxic to the kidneys.

Mrs Booth remains seriously ill, is dependent on dialysis and hopes for a kidney transplant.

Yet in June 2008, herbalist Michael McIntyre and scientist Professor Michael Pittilo met with the then Health Minister Ben Bradshaw to advise him that statutory regulation of herbalists must go ahead as swiftly as possible in the interest of patient safety. They were presenting the recommendations of the Department of Health Steering Group on regulation of herbalists and acupuncturists that Professor Pittilo chaired.

Among the recommendations was a licensing system that would prevent dubious suppliers from operating – also providing controls over the herbs practitioners use.

McIntyre even warned the Minister that, without statutory regulation, contamination of Chinese medicines with *Aristolochia* could cause of injury or deaths in the UK – as it already had in *Belgium*.

He said today (12th February 2010):

“It beggars belief that they are content to place lives at risk because of its abject failure to provide statutory regulation of herbal medicine practitioners.

“They promised regulation nearly ten years ago. They even announced a timetable which would have seen it happen in 2005. Instead, Ministers set up another Steering Group and another consultation.

It is time to stop talking and start acting.”

The shop owner where it is alleged Mrs Booth obtained the medicine and a so-called “Chinese doctor” are on trial accused of possessing and supplying the medicine. They deny the charges.

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Notes to editors:

1. For more information, contact Michael McIntyre, info@ehpa.eu
2. The European Herbal and Traditional Medicine Practitioners Association is an umbrella body which represents professional associations of 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 the legal basis of practice across EU Members States and promoting best practice. More information about the EHTPA can be found at: www.ehpa.eu
3. In 2000, the respected House of Lords' Select Committee for Science and Technology published a report into complementary and alternative medicine that recommended the statutory regulation of practitioners of herbal medicine and acupuncture. The Government agreed that this regulation should go ahead as long ago as 2001 but nine years later the herbalists are still waiting a final decision and the public remain at risk from back street, bogus practitioners and misidentified and adulterated herbal products.
4. Since the House of Lords' report, there have been three Department of Health Steering Groups looking at the issue of statutory regulation. All three reiterated the call for immediate statutory regulation. The most recent of these Steering Groups reported in June 2008. It was chaired by Professor Michael Pittilo, Vice-Chancellor of Robert Gordon University.
5. There have also been two public consultations. The first, held in 2004 and published in 2005, found overwhelming support for statutory regulation. Following that, the Government

published a timetable for its introduction which would have seen regulation in place by the end of 2005. The second consultation, which took place in the autumn of 2009, has yet to report.

6. A recent Ipsos Mori Poll found that a quarter of the UK population use over the counter herbal medicines while millions of Britons visit herbal practitioners.