

A herbalist's reply to Guardian article

Herbalists' cocktails may do more harm than good, say researchers - Sarah Boseley - Guardian - 4th October 2007

Because the implications seem potentially so serious I am sorry to say I am considering making a formal complaint about this story to the PCC. This is just another health story in a long line of stories by the Guardian, which promote one point of view to the detriment of public health and safety.

As a lawyer with a background as a trained scientist I have been directly involved with the drug industry in relation to herbal medicines. In my professional work I have met and dealt with medical and scientific professionals on different occasions who are involved in pharmaceutical research and the commercialisation of herbal, nutritional and other natural remedies and who recognise and in some cases are in awe at the efficacy of herbal medicines and the skills of herbalists.

There is an absence of balance in the story and the story itself is misleading to the public and positively dangerous in that it could put people off perfectly safe effective remedies for the alternatives from drug companies which are not as safe or effective as the MHRA, BMA and government want us to think.

The pharmaceutical industry have been trawling the world to snap up the secrets to numerous herbal, nutritional and other natural remedies in an attempt to turn them into conventional pill and bottled patented remedies. A notable example among many doing this is Phytopharm plc. And only yesterday in the Daily Mail is an example of one outcome "Anti-cancer pill made of wine, rice and berries".

At the same time as the pharmaceutical industry are doing that they are desperately trying to knock the traditional herbalists, nutritionalists and others out of the picture with misleading stories like the one you, regrettably, have been fed and more regrettably, your paper has published. Who is going to pay large amounts of money for an expensive patented medicine when they can treat themselves, without the risk of serious side effects, with safe plant medicines? The story also looks like bordering on trade or other libel on all herbalists and others who sell herbal, nutritional and other natural remedies.

It is farcical of the "researchers" to suggest that because no one has paid for formal research into herbal, nutritional and other natural remedies that there is no evidence of efficacy. There are large numbers of known and proven nutritional and other natural remedies which have not been formally researched and written up for publication in medical or scientific journals. No pharmaceutical company is going to fund research to prove a remedy anyone can knock up in their kitchen at minimal cost is safe and effective.

Drug companies control the evidence base in medical research. Two thirds of so-called "research" is funded by the drug industry. And the medical profession, with considerable drug company influence, has adopted a demonstrably nonsensical evidence base. This favours expensive published research, which mainly only drug companies can afford to carry out. No one is carrying out needed research to demonstrate the efficacy of simple nutritional and other natural remedies on the scale needed. I am confident the NHS could save billions by investing in research into herbal, nutritional and other natural remedies to prove them safe and effective in the literature.

And frankly, the suggestion from the "experts" referred to in the story that three randomised clinical trials (RCTs) tell us anything about the efficacy of herbal medicines in general is just not scientific and a joke. If you want to know something about the drawbacks of RCTs and why medical evidence is such a mess, please consider this peer reviewed paper in the Journal of American Physicians and Surgeons On Evidence, Medical and Legal by University of Washington professor of surgery Donald W. Miller, Jr., and me. Here is just one example from the paper:-

"With regard to Alzheimer's disease, Saver and Kalafut calculate that 127 RCTs would have to be done in 63,500 patients over a 286-year period to determine the optimal combination of agents to treat this disease. [23]"

Stories like the one you had published today are a danger to the health and safety of the public.

We should also restore the right of pharmacists to mix and dispense compositions on the premises.

That was a right taken away by the EU after intensive lobbying by the pharmaceutical industry.

Frankly, another farcical aspect of this is that vastly more people are killed and injured by

conventional drug treatments than any other kind of drug, legal and illegal. We also have a pharmaceutical industry some parts of which are recognised in some quarters as being out of control. We do not have to look very far for incredibly serious examples of the promotion of dangerous pharmaceuticals to the mass-market in some cases with fraud involved.

I have learnt enough to know there are many safe effective herbal, nutritional and other natural remedies which we are all being denied because of the power of the pharmaceutical industry in the promotion of medicines of sometimes dubious efficacy. And if you want proof of that, consider this. On 8th December 2003 Dr Allen Roses of GlaxoSmithKline was quoted by Science Editor Steve Connor of The Independent newspaper as saying at a scientific meeting in London where Dr Roses cited figures on how well different classes of drugs work in real patients [1]:-

"The vast majority of drugs - more than 90 per cent - only work in 30 or 50 per cent of the people," Dr Roses said. "I wouldn't say that most drugs don't work. I would say that most drugs work in 30 to 50 per cent of people. Drugs out there on the market work, but they don't work in everybody." Connor's story went on to say:-

"It is an open secret within the drugs industry that most of its products are ineffective in most patients but this is the first time that such a senior drugs boss has gone public. His comments come days after it emerged that the NHS drugs bill has soared by nearly 50 per cent in three years, rising by £2.3bn a year to an annual cost to the taxpayer of £7.2bn."

Glaxo chief: Our drugs do not work on most patients By Steve Connor, Science Editor 08 December 2003

And then we need to look at the medical profession itself - with this example from the BMJ:-

Why do doctors use treatments that do not work? Jenny Doust, Chris Del Mar, BMJ. 2004 February 28; 328(7438): 474-475.

It is well-known in research circles not to rely on author's opinions and particularly not what appears in the discussion or conclusions sections. Regrettably, publicity seeking authors who might be chasing down their next research grant sometimes manage to get news coverage for their work by issuing news releases containing inflammatory quotes which they anticipate will get the attention of the media.

Whilst these "researchers" have failed to demonstrate that herbal, nutritional and other natural remedies are generally ineffective what they have done is demonstrated how lacking in science the opinions of authors or medical papers can be.

I look forward to hearing from you. It might be wise for the Guardian to start running a regular feature on herbal and other natural nutritional and other natural remedies that work even though not published in the medical literature. It also might be wise to get the bottom line on not quoting the results of single studies as if they were the gospel.

It is Bad Science.

Sincerely,