

Label for first homoeopathic product may be illegal, warns senior scientist

June 10 2009

The labelling for the first homoeopathic product to get a licence from the UK Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulatory Agency (MHRA) should be illegal, because they breach Unfair Trading regulations, argues a senior scientist today.

In a letter published in this week's *BMJ*, Professor David Colquhoun from University College London says the MHRA "has made a mockery of its own aims" by allowing Arnica 30C pills to be labelled "a homoeopathic medicinal product used with the homoeopathic tradition for the symptomatic relief of sprains, muscular aches, and bruising or swelling after contusions."

This label should be illegal, he says, because the pills contain no trace of the ingredient on the label, but this deceit has been allowed through a legal loophole for a long time now. He points out that if you sold strawberry jam that contained not a trace of strawberry you'd be in trouble.

But he can see no such loophole that allows manufacturers of Arnica 30C to evade the consumer protection laws which ban "falsely claiming that a product is able to cure illnesses" and which apply to the way that "the average consumer" will interpret the label.

The average consumer is unlikely to know that "used with the homoeopathic tradition" is a form of weasel words that actually means "there isn't a jot of evidence that the medicine works," he writes.

Since there is not the slightest evidence that Arnica 30C pills provide symptomatic relief of sprains, etc, the labelling that the MHRA has approved seems to be illegal, he concludes.

In a second letter, Professor Stephen Evans from the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine believes that the MHRA could have resisted granting a licence because there is "good evidence against any efficacy."

This fiasco, he says, takes us back to the days before drug regulation was introduced, partly to prevent hazards of snake oil-type remedies. And he warns that this product "may have major indirect harms - not only in individual patients who may not get benefit from the other effective remedies but also in a general sense by undermining the rational basis for medicine."

In a final letter, Nicholas Moore, a clinical pharmacologist at the University of Bordeaux, says that "giving homoeopathy credit for any kind of demonstrable efficacy is ludicrous."

But he suggests that homoeopathy might be useful as "a truly inactive placebo" for over-treated illnesses such as the common cold and insomnia. This "will not alter the course of the disease. But the patient will feel better, which is one of the aims of medicine's art, if not its science," he writes.

Source: BMJ-British Medical Journal

Citation: Label for first homoeopathic product may be illegal, warns senior scientist (2009, June 10) retrieved 20 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2009-06-homoeopathic-product-illegal-senior-scientist.html>

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