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Alternative medicine is too silly to regulate

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THE QUACKS are marching up Whitehall. After five years, and the deliberations of a House of Lords committee, two government working groups and the Prince of Wales, ministers are poised to regulate acupuncture and herbal medicine. A consultation document published yesterday proposes a self-regulation scheme under the umbrella of a complementary and alternative medicine council.

What this will achieve is as vague as the health benefits of herbal medicine. The damage it will ultimately do could be devastating. Ministers claim regulation will safeguard the public against dubious products and dodgy docs. Yet alternative medicine does little if any harm. There is the occasional case where a patient refuses conventional treatment in favour of complementary medicine, and dies. But herbal remedies have been shown to be dangerous only rarely. Between 1968 and 1997, the World Health Organisation collected 8,985 reports from 55 countries of adverse incidents associated with herbal medicines, a tiny fraction of the number of adverse events associated with conventional drugs over the same period. Women have been treated in hospital after being prescribed Chinese herbal slimming remedies containing a drug linked to hypertension and heart disease. Well, more fool them. Ban one quack recipe and these people would take another. You cannot regulate for silliness. And shelling out £50 for a pile of wood shavings and some grey-green powdered thing from the local Chinese quack is plain silly.

Herbal remedies, along with psychoanalysis, reflexology, aromatherapy and the rest (colonic irrigation, yuk), are the leisure activity of choice for those with too much time and money. Britons spend £1.6 billion a year on alternative medicine.

Why should — how can — government protect them against their silliness? The government proposal says “a modern statutory regulatory framework provides reassurance that a practitioner is not only suitably qualified, but also competent and up to date with developments in practice”. Since when? Lawyers are self-regulated but there are corrupt lawyers.

Doctors are self-regulated and there are some very bad doctors. Self-regulated physiotherapists and osteopaths range from excellent to very, very poor.

But the new council will confer spurious legitimacy upon many dubious practitioners. It will comprise, among others, practitioners of traditional acupuncture, Western medical

acupuncture, Western herbal medicine, traditional Chinese medicine and Ayurveda. Question 10 in the consultation document issued by the Department of Health yesterday asks: "Would it be possible for the herbal medicine traditions of Kampo and Tibetan herbal medicine to be individually represented on Council?" Somebody has too much time on their hands.

According to a report last year from the Herbal Medicine Regulatory Working Group, which recommended the establishment of the council, the British Ayurvedic Medical Council/British Association of Accredited Ayurvedic Practitioners are less than happy with certain elements of the proposals, but "the Ayurvedic Medical Association who are represented on the working group and the Maharishi Ayurveda Physicians' Association who are not . . . have both endorsed the Ayurvedic medicine element of the curriculum". This will be the oddest and most ineffectual regulatory body known to mankind.

Yet its very existence will be entirely beneficial for those it "regulates" and disastrous for the NHS. For the so-called regulation of the alternative health market is an important step in a growing movement to make alternative medicine available to everyone, free.

In an article three years ago the Prince of Wales, the movement's figurehead, who has been working with the Department of Health, wrote: ". . . alternative medicine should be available to all on the NHS . . . health should be more than the mere absence of disease or infirmity . . . we should strive to ensure that everybody can fulfil the full potential and expression of their lives." Indeed we should. But it is not the job of the NHS. Feeling unfulfilled without a boyfriend? Got the urge to express yourself with a bit of painting? Trot down to the GP to demand a "painting the soul" art course — for singletons. On prescription.

Even the practitioners of herbal medicine do not pretend to be able to prove that all of it works. Efficacy is hard to prove, they say, because plants are chemically complex and the active constituents are not always known. For this reason, proposed changes to the 1968 Medicines Act, and an EU directive, both aimed at regulating herbal medicines, are trying to ensure simply that they are safe, not effective.

When a respected doctor, Edzard Ernst, former Professor in Physical and Rehabilitation Medicine in Hanover and Vienna, became the first and only professor of complementary medicine in Britain, he found that most of the country's unregulated practitioners were implacably opposed to his plans. Why? He intended to discover which remedies worked. Professor Ernst carried out a clinical trial of arnica, one of the most commonly used homoeopathic treatments, for healing bumps and bruises. He found it is ineffectual: it neither reduces pain nor accelerates healing. Thousands of parents would swear otherwise.

In the end, belief in herbal remedies is just that, a faith. You think it does you some good, it probably does. It does little harm. I have used many forms of it myself. Faith, as they say, can move mountains. But as long as it remains a scientifically unproven and unprovable religion, it should have no part to play in the NHS.