



HOLISTIC HEALTH: Healing or harmful?

VIEWPOINT:

Benoit Turpin
Owner of Pleasant Stone Farm
Health-food store in Middletown

Q. Tests by researchers and private labs suggest that what's on the label of vitamin and herbal supplements is not exactly accurate. Do you believe there may be quality problems involved in these unregulated products?

A. Of course there are. There are a lot of disreputable companies out there that are out to make a quick buck. They're here one day and gone the next. These companies are not going to take the time or spend the money it takes to ensure that only the herb goes in the bottle.

Q. Supplements can go straight to market without FDA approval and only come into question if someone gets sick. Do you consider this a double standard?

A. Well, this is a two-sided question. On one hand, I would say yes, it is a double standard, and there should be some controls. On the other hand, if there were regulations, companies would have to spend more money to implement their own quality control measures. That would drive up the prices of their products. A lot of people wouldn't be able to afford herbs anymore.

Q. There have been tests to prove that certain herbal products do not do what is claimed one way or another. Ginkgo, for instance, is supposed to improve memory and is recommended for people with dementia and Alzheimer's disease. But a large six-year study has shown it ineffective at preventing these illnesses, and ginkgo doesn't improve the memory of people over 60 at all. What's more, lead has been found in some ginkgo products. What do you think about this?

A. I strongly disagree with the first part. The advantages of using ginkgo and other herbs have been well documented and over a very long time, too. I'm talking about hundreds of years and, for some, thousands.

All products are going to have their detractors and create so-called "studies" to find something wrong with them. Let's not be naïve about this. We live in a political world where money talks. Who runs the FDA? Why, the pharmaceutical companies, of course. Who stands to benefit if herbal companies are regulated? The drug companies, and they're a bigger business than we are. As for the lead content, it all



Times Herald-Record/TOM BUSHEY

Benoit Turpin, placing hibiscus flowers into a bag at Pleasant Stone Farm in Middletown, says he believes in educated consumers.

falls back to the manufacturers.

Q. What are you doing to guarantee that the products you sell contain what they say they contain? Is there a quality control mechanism in play?

A. First of all, I purchase my products from reputable distributors. I know the companies I deal with because I visit them and ask them questions. They have quality control measures in place. And they're interested in people and not trying to just push the prod-

uct. I'm not going to sell flaky products from companies I don't know.

Secondly, I understand the herbal industry inside and out. I know what to look for and what questions to ask of my distributors to make sure the products I'm selling are exactly what they claim they are.

Q. How do you ensure that a natural product does not have unintended side effects or react negatively with a current medication the patient is taking? Do you have that type

of training to understand drug interactions?

A. I have a master's degree in food science, and I've been in the herbal food and supplement industry for 15 years. I inform my customers about herbs before they buy them. I provide literature and/or ask them questions – such as if they have ever used the product they are buying.

I had a woman in my store not too long ago who bought a bottle containing a calcium supplement. But by asking her questions, I learned that she

was allergic to yeast and this particular brand had a yeast derivative. I do this all the time.

I have a weekly radio show on WTBO, out of Florida, and I inform the public of the uses for herbs and the latest clinical studies on them. I believe in educated consumers.

This is my life. It's what I do, and I believe that what I am doing is worthwhile. I make an impact by selling products to help people maintain good health.

Sheldon Scruggs

VIEWPOINT:



Times Herald-Record/MICHELE HASKELL

Supplements should be treated the same as regular drugs, says pharmacist Kimberly Williams at Gusar's Pharmacy in Monticello.

Kimberly Williams,
registered pharmacist
Gusar's Pharmacy, Monticello

Q. Tests by researchers and private labs suggest that what's on the label of vitamin and herbal supplements is not exactly accurate. Do you believe there may be quality problems involved in these unregulated products?

A. Yes. I believe there is a

quality problem with vitamin and herbal supplements, since the companies making them are not regulated by the FDA.

Q. Yet many FDA-approved drugs have been recalled, as well. How do you explain that?

A. There is a risk associated with taking any drug. That cannot be avoided, but having

safety and efficacy guidelines in place help to greatly reduce the risk to the public.

Q. Supplements can go straight to market without FDA approval and come into question only if someone gets sick. Do you consider this a double standard?

A. Yes, I believe it would be safer for the public if supplements were treated the same

as regular drugs, because in essence they are.

Q. Are there any particularly dangerous interactions that you'd like to warn patients about?

A. The best advice I can give to anyone considering an herbal supplement or vitamin is to talk with their doctor about what they should take.

Sheldon Scruggs

Consumers are warned: 'Anyone can sell a pill'

The Associated Press

Some people who buy supplements to avoid Big Pharma drug companies may find themselves doing business with Big Herba instead.

Some of the same companies that mass-produce drugs in huge chemical labs also churn out vitamin and herbal pills sold in bottles with rainbows, sunrises and flowers on their labels.

Dozens of other supplement makers reap more than \$100 million in annual sales. One of the largest – NBTY Inc., on New York's Long Island – sold \$2 billion last year in the United States alone. Its brands include Nature's Bounty, Vitamin World, Puritan's Pride and Sundown.

"They used to be mom and pop operations, but now they're major companies," said Bruce Silverglade, chief lawyer for

the consumer group, Center for Science in the Public Interest.

Granola image a boon

The industry's little-guy, granola image has been a great marketing asset, allowing it to tap into Americans' frustration with big medicine, big prices and big risks. Supplement makers are dwarfed by leading pharmaceutical firms, whose drugs command sales in the tens of billions of dollars. Yet the reality is that natural remedy makers constitute a sizable business that doesn't have to play by the same rules as companies that make prescription or over-the-counter medicines.

The Dietary Supplement and Health Education Act of 1994 exempted supplements from needing federal Food and Drug Administration approval, or

proof of safety and effectiveness, before they go on sale.

Americans spent more than \$23 billion on vitamin, herb and other supplements in 2007. Growth in supplement sales soared after the 1994 law but sputtered when the FDA linked scores of deaths and heart problems to diet supplements containing ephedra, which it banned in 2004.

After ephedra, "the growth fell off and has never returned" to double-digit rates, although sales still are rising at a more modest pace, said Michael McGuffin, president of the American Herbal Products Association.

Consumers need to be cautious

In 2007, the FDA adopted good manufacturing practices, or GMPs, that set broad goals for companies to ensure

quality and safety of their products, which still won't need FDA approval to be sold. Big companies now must meet those standards, while small businesses have until next year to comply.

Big companies may be more likely to make a product that is pure and contains what it claims because "they have more to lose" by selling something that's inferior, said Dr. Tod Cooperman, president of ConsumerLab.com, a testing service.

The bottom line: "Consumers need to be cautious," Cooperman said. "To get into the game doesn't take very much. Anyone can sell a pill."

ON THE WEB:

Council for Responsible Nutrition:
www.crnusa.org/

Labs

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Potency problems

In ConsumerLab.com testing in November, four out of seven supplements contained less ginkgo than claimed on their labels, and one failed to break apart properly to release its ingredients. Seven out of nine failed in tests in 2003, as did six out of 13 in 2005.

"It is now believed that ginkgo is among the most adulterated herbs," the company reports.

Tests by California scientists of two dozen ginseng supplements, reported in a nutrition journal in 2001, found that many differed from their labels. The concentrations of some ginseng compounds varied by up to 200-fold from product to product.

In ConsumerLab.com tests, six out of nine chondroitin supplements failed testing in April 2007. One had only 8 percent of what it claimed to contain, and one "maximum strength" product had none.

Vitamins and minerals had problems, too. A "high potency" iron supplement contained less than half the amount claimed. Of 23 top-selling vitamin C pills, one provided less than half the amount promised; the suggested dosages of some others were beyond recommended safe levels.

Last year, nearly 200 people were sickened by supplements containing up to 200 times the amount of selenium stated on the label.

The FDA has repeatedly warned about herbal pills found to contain versions of Viagra and similar drugs to help men get an erection. These can pose a heart hazard, especially when taken with certain medications.

In December, the FDA expanded warnings about dozens of brands of weight-loss pills that contained prescription drugs not disclosed on labels.

Other studies suggest that high doses of vitamin C may help shield cancer cells from treatments designed to kill the cancer.

"Antioxidants are not the magic bullets that the supplement industry would like consumers to believe," said David Schardt, a nutrition expert with the consumer advocacy group the Center for Science in the Public Interest. "They're not even necessarily benign."