

Rethinking the Bigger Picture

by Shawn Buckley

When I look at the world around me, I give thanks that I live in a country where I have a voice and am free to express my opinions. Canada is a country revered for its beauty, its people and acceptance of other cultures. Unfortunately, there remain many societies around the world that do not respect individuals' right to choice, nor welcome different cultures and beliefs.

My family is fortunate to live in a country ranked thirtieth in health systems, out of 190 countries, according to the World Health Organization's (WHO) ratings. <http://www.photius.com/rankings/healthranks.html>. Would most of us like to be ranked number one? Probably! However, until we move up on the WHO rankings, we are still fortunate to have a health care system that is envied by many peoples and governments around the globe.

Health care is "top of mind" for most Canadians and it continues to be a main subject in election debates and political party campaign platforms. It is evident that we Canadians place a great deal of importance on our health.

Part of our informal health care system is the use of non-prescription, natural health products. According to the 2001 Berger Population Health Monitor study, 75 per cent of Canadians have used one or more natural health products in the previous six months and the number of Canadians who sought naturopathic or herbalist services has tripled. Each year, studies demonstrate that more and more Canadians are opting for a more preventative and self-managed approach to their health—finding a balance between the best of conventional and complementary health approaches. We are discovering that there are many determinants to health and wellness.

There has been a lot of media attention on natural health products recently due to Bill C-51 which proposes amendments to the current Food and Drugs Act. Many Canadians are alarmed that their current freedom of health choice may be in jeopardy. Consumers, fearful of losing access to their natural health products, have telephoned and written letters to government officials to express their concern. Many health business owners, fearful that they will not survive if the proposed amendments come into force, have resorted to mailing cards or petitions to their Members of Parliament. As a result, anti-Bill C-51 groups, rallies, and websites have sprung up across the country.

I can't help but wonder if we have lost our focus and need to rethink our approach considering that the regulation of Natural Health Products is relatively new. In the early 1990s, Health Canada closed what was once a world-class laboratory that analyzed natural products for consumer safety. In January 2004, Health Canada placed the onus on natural product manufacturers to prove safe use for its consumers—a procedure in keeping with the requirements

of the pharmaceutical industry. This change resulted in a massive backlash from concerned Canadians who feared that their access to natural products was at risk.

This public movement culminated in the Canadian House of Commons Standing Committee on Health making a series of recommendations aimed at protecting access to natural health products. Health Canada responded with the development of the Natural Health Product Regulations. Some people disagree about whether the new regulations are true to the Committee's recommendations. I think, however, that this misses the point. Canadians spoke loudly and clearly in the mid 1990's; they wanted the freedom to make their own health care choices.

It should not come as a surprise that a first attempt at writing meaningful legislation will not result in a panacea; the best course of action, naturally, is to revisit the issue to see how the legislation can be improved. We should try to rethink the bigger picture. One of the burdens that we place on civil servants is that if regulations fail, and people are harmed, they are severely criticized for not doing enough. The management of the Listeriosis bacterial infection is an example. If we want freedom of choice, we have to be willing to accept some level of risk if something goes wrong. Hopefully, by enabling our government's policy makers to protect health freedom, we can arrive at a more balanced and integrative health care system that meets the needs of all Canadians. ♦

Shawn Buckley is President of the Natural Health Products Protection Association.

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