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Some not so complementary comments

The term complementary medicine covers a wide range of products and therapies. These include vitamins and mineral supplements, herbal preparations, aromatherapy and homeopathic treatments.

Alternative or traditional are words often used to describe approaches to health care that might be considered to be outside the realm of conventional medicines as practised in Australia. But given the apparently growing popularity of complementary medicines, it might be argued their use is hardly unconventional. It has been estimated that more than 50% of Australians regularly use some form of complementary medicines.

However, last week the Therapeutic Goods Administration (TGA) delivered some disturbing news about complementary medicines. The TGA is the health and safety regulator for therapeutic goods. That is: it is the medicines watchdog.

Most complementary medicines, considered to be of comparatively low risk, are simply “listed” with the TGA. This generally ensures they are manufactured appropriately with safe ingredients, but these listed medicines are not evaluated for safety, so the TGA does not guarantee they work.

But, in a so-called post listing compliance review of complementary medicines over a period of 18 months to December last year, the TGA found about 90% failed to comply with the established standards and about 50% did not have evidence to back up the advertised claims.

In Australia all prescription medicines and most non-prescription medicines available only in pharmacies are “registered” with the TGA. This means they must meet levels of quality and safety and be demonstrated to be effective.

Aust L numbers (for listed medicines) and Aust R numbers (for registered medicines) must appear on the product labels.

Perhaps by unhappy coincidence, last week was also designated homeopathy awareness week. The concept of homeopathy was developed in the late 18th century at a time when blood-letting purging and other ineffective and dangerous procedures were normal medical practice. These cures were almost always worse than the complaints; so doing nothing was definitely a good option – and that pretty much describes homeopathy. The diluted “like cures like” principle of homeopathy means that it is highly unlikely that even one molecule of active ingredient exists in the finished product. Homeopathy works as an often expensive placebo.

A distinction can be made between complementary and alternative treatments, where the former are used together with the “conventional” therapy and the latter instead of. In either case, with complementary and alternative medicines (CAMs), there is the potential for problems to occur.

Clearly, natural is not always necessarily safe. But if CAMS are your cup of herbal tea, then there are ways of managing the risk.

The Pharmaceutical Society of Australia has produced a fact card titled *Complementary Medicines*. The card – which is available from all pharmacies across Australia providing the Self Care health information – identifies the problems and pitfall of CAMs, and also indicates which of the claims made from various popular CAMs can be supported by evidence.

For instance, there is no conclusive evidence of benefit from echinacea, evening primrose oil, ginkgo or ginseng. On the positive side, many people have gained some pain relief from osteoarthritis symptoms with glucosamine; and long-term use of cranberry juice or extract helps prevent the occurrence of urinary tract infection. And fish oil has well established benefits in reducing the risk of cardiovascular disease and in treating some of the symptoms of rheumatoid arthritis.

In any event, the undeniable fact is that complementary and alternative medicines (other than homeopathic products) are made up of chemicals, just like any medicine. If they are taken in a dose sufficient to have some benefit, they can also do harm.

Before self selecting any CAM, especially if you are taking a prescription medicine, check first with your pharmacist. And for the location of your nearest “Self Care” pharmacy, log onto the Pharmaceutical Society website at www.psa.org.au