

# NEWS RELEASE

## NDMAC responds to Blind Trust: The Toronto Star's Investigation into Alternative Medicine

### FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

**Ottawa, Ontario, January 24, 2000** - The Toronto Star recently published a special report entitled "Blind Trust: An Investigation into Alternative Medicine". The special report comprised the following articles:

- Blind trust: Herbal "cures" - It's a free-for-all of weak standards, few rules and unknown side effects (January 15, 2000)
- Product labels seldom delivered on promises, lab tests show (January 15, 2000)
- Cancer sufferers gamble long odds (January 16, 2000)
- Drugstore chain to investigate herbal remedies: Pharma Plus may pull those without full warnings (January 17, 2000)
- Herbal drink maker faces false advertising charges: Etobicoke firm set to appear in court tomorrow (January 19, 2000)
- Who pins acupuncture to professional standard? No discipline, no rules - anyone can set up shop (January 22, 2000)
- Figuring out the rules: Ottawa's Office of Natural Health Products is meant as regulatory medicine, soothing society's turmoil over herbal remedies. Like any dramatic therapy, it carries controversial side effects and potential dangers (January 22, 2000)
- Faithful flock to "cures", but scientists want proof: Health-care field divided over natural therapies (January 23, 2000)

The Toronto Star also asked its online readers "*Do you believe alternative medicine should be regulated*". NDMAC President David Skinner and Director of Public and Professional Affairs Gerry Harrington posted the following comments on the discussion board.

### **David Skinner, Jan. 17, 2000**

Every consumer study to date has shown dissatisfaction with the current regulatory system for Natural Health Products. The ability to mislead consumers by skirting the law is what consumers most dislike and fear. Regulating safety is foremost in everyone's mind but safety has issues such as claims and quality attached. Is something that is claimed to cure cancer but doesn't (resulting in progress of the cancer to incurable stages) a safety issue? Is the method of manufacture which may permit toxins to be included incidentally not a safety issue?



Many would try to boil the issue down to laying blame on someone else and not deal with the details of how consumers ought to be, and demand to be, protected from fraud and danger.

Yes, there ought to be regulation. It ought to be fair, and reasonably achieve its objectives of bringing safe products to the consumer so that they can develop a trust for the products and continue to use them effectively. Nothing could be worse for the future of the Natural Health Products industry than to have consumers reject these valuable products because the one they took didn't work. Consumers are not willing to keep trying every brand until they find one that works (the cost would be outrageous).

Let's not forget that self-care has a significant impact on health care. Self-care using Natural Health Products can save the formal medical care system billions if it is used properly and regulated appropriately to ensure that the products achieve their intended purpose.

While I have some issues with some specifics in the article, if it serves to accelerate the process of getting to the point where consumers can have confidence in their self-care products, the article has value.

**Gerry Harrington, Jan. 20, 2000**

If the series "Blind Trust: An Investigation into Alternative Medicine" serves to add urgency to the development of the new regulatory framework for Natural Health Products, then it will have served us all well. By highlighting some of the problems with existing products in an essentially unregulated market, you may leave readers with a somewhat more negative picture of the status quo than really exists, but the point remains that we CAN do better than this.

The Nonprescription Drug Manufacturers Association of Canada has been working to foster an environment for the growth of evidence-based self-care for over 100 years. Consumers themselves have aggressively broadened the concept of self-care in recent years by embracing new options, including natural health products like herbal remedies, in unprecedented numbers. Since 1996, our annual surveys of Canadian self-care practices and attitudes have revealed that the proportion of Canadians using this type of remedy has grown from fewer than one in seven, to more than one in three. These surveys also show that the most important challenge faced by these new users of herbal and other natural health products is information. The best way to help them meet that challenge is a new regulatory environment which ensures proper product labelling. Such labelling needs, at a minimum, to include the following: an accurate description of the product's contents, what the product is to be used for, correct dosing instructions and adequate warnings and precautions.



Achieving this goal will rely on other regulatory measures on good manufacturing practices, standards of evidence for claims and so forth. The Health Canada Advisory Panel on Natural Health Products, the federal Parliamentary Committee on Health and the Office of Natural Health Products have collectively moved us very close to the point at which such standards can be introduced. If the experience of the conventional over the counter drug industry is any predictor, the increased consumer confidence which arises from such regulation will help grow this sector of health care. Economic research conducted here in Canada has demonstrated that increasing safe and effective self-care options saves the health care system money. Given the current crisis in health care resources, that consideration alone should be enough to prompt action.

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