LEGAL HERBS

FTC CHARGES

The Federal Trade Commission (FTC) established an enforcement action “Operation Cure All” against companies that fraudulently market dietary supplements with outrageous and illegal claims. The action is supported by the American Herbal Products Association. Natural Organics, Inc. settled FTC charges of making what were considered unsubstantiated claims that their herb and vitamin supplement Pedio-Active ADD effectively treats Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and improves attention span and scholastic performance. FTC website: www.ftc.gov


COMFREY BAN?

The FTC enforced action against Utah-based Christopher Enterprises Inc. for marketing comfrey products and making unsupported claims that they are safe and can treat diseases such as tuberculosis, broken bones, polio, and multiple sclerosis. A preliminary FTC injunction prohibits selling comfrey products for use internally or on open wounds. It also requires labels to warn they are for external use only and state, “Comfrey contains pyrrolizidine alkaloids, which may cause serious illness or death. This product should not be taken orally, used as a suppository or applied to broken skin.” Since this is the second company cited within a month, the FDA issued a cautionary letter in July 2001 to the natural products industry and strongly recommended that common comfrey (Symphytum officinale), prickly comfrey (S. asperum), and Russian comfrey (S. x uplandicum) be removed from the market. They state “scientific literature clearly associates” the pyrrolizidine alkaloids in comfrey with liver disease in animals.

[See AHA 7:4 &9:3.] Excessive amounts of similar liver compounds have been shown to be toxic to other tissues. They are asking manufacturers to report adverse events to the FDA MedWatch.


HERBAL TOX STUDIES

Herbs are being studied for their toxicity by the National Toxicology Program at the National Institutes of Environmental Health Science at Research Triangle in North Carolina. Eleven herbs or herbal compounds were selected for a Fact Sheet published in March 2001. These are aloe vera (Aloe vera), comfrey (Symphytum sp.), echinacea (Echinacea sp.), ginkgo (Ginkgo biloba), goldenseal (Hydrastis canadensis), ginseng (Panax ginseng), kava (Piper methysticum), milk thistle (Silybum marianum), and black walnut (Juglans nigra). They are also investigating the absorption, metabolism, and excretion of the toxic compounds thujone, as found in thujja oil (Thuja occidentalis) and pulegone from pennyroyal (Mentha pulegium). Find NIEHS at NIH website: niehs.nih.gov


FDA HERBAL ADDITIVES WARNING

The Food and Drug Administration warned that herbs added to food products were “novel ingredients” that might not be recognized as safe. Food producers are only allowed to add FDA-approved ingredients. Warning letters were sent to several companies whose products contain ginkgo (Ginkgo biloba), eleuthero or Siberian ginseng (Eleutherococcus senticosus) and echinacea (Echinacea sp.). Herb-infused drinks are the fastest growing segment of the beverage business, according to market research firm Frost & Sullivans. The market jumped from less than $20 million in 1997 to $700 million in 2000. Pepsi Company’s SoBe beverages and Cadbury Schweppes’ line of Snapple drinks have products that contain echinacea.

NY Times, June 7, 2001 (by G. Winter).

FDA SUED AGAIN

Julian M. Whitaker MD, Durk Pearson, Sandy Shaw, and the American Preventive Medical Association has once again sued the FDA in July 2001. This was after the FDA denied the health claim “antioxidant vitamins may reduce the risk of certain types of cancer” for labels on certain supplements for the second time.


COMMITTEE ON AGING

The US Senate Special Committee on Aging discussed herb and vitamin supplement companies that mislead consumers in a September 2001 hearing entitled “Swindlers, Hucksters and Snake Oil Salesmen: The Hype and Hope of Marketing Anti-Aging Products to Seniors.” One company discussed was the direct marketing company GB Data Systems. The Dietary Supplement Education Alliance and the Council for Responsible Nutrition issued releases just before the hearing promoting more positive news about supplements, including a study on the elderly conducted by the National Institutes of Health. Website: www.senate.gov/~aging

Health Supplement Retailer, November 2001.