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THE CONVERSATION

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Evidence homeopathy works is pretty clear: it doesn't. from www.shutterstock.com

Government decision not to ban homeopathy sales from pharmacies is a mistake

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Last year a review into pharmacy in Australia recommended homeopathic products be banned from sale in chemist shops across the country. This was a sensible recommendation, given pharmacists are trusted scientists in the community and science tells us homeopathic products simply don't work.

In the government's recent response to this review they "noted" the concerns of the reviewer, and have chosen not to adopt it. Here's why that is a mistake.

What is homeopathy?

Homeopathy involves extreme dilution of a compound that is claimed to be therapeutically effective, and uses the concept of "like cures like". For example a fever might be treated with a compound used to induce fevers, in the belief the diluted active ingredient will have the opposite effect and cure the fever.

Products tend to contain the equivalent active ingredient to a single molecule within an Olympic-size swimming pool. Practitioners of fact-based medicine have understandably indicated that any effect of

Author



Bruce Baer Arnold

Assistant Professor, School of Law,
University of Canberra

the product could only be attributable to the placebo effect (it works because you believe it works) or because the product contains alcohol or a similar base.

Read more: No evidence homeopathy is effective: NHMRC review

Most pharmacists probably abhor such treatments lacking evidence, given they go through years of rigorous university training, are heavily regulated and have a strong professional ethic. But it makes the cash registers clang.

These days pharmacies also sell jelly beans, lipstick, energy bars, vitamins, teddy bears and sunglasses – as well as prescription medications. This, unfortunately, is business practice.

Read more: Discount chemists are cheapening the quality of pharmacy along with the price



Pharmacists are trusted scientists. from www.shutterstock.com

Business v health care

Pharmacies have a special status as businesses, along with many actors in the health system. Successive governments have grappled with tensions around service delivery, standards and competition.

They've also had to grapple with a very strong industry body, the Pharmacy Guild (stronger than the Pharmaceutical Society). Much of the review reflects agreement between them. In responding to the

review the government has flicked the homeopathic hot potato to pharmacy owners:

Professional standards have been designed for use by individual pharmacists to assess their own professional practice. They are intended to serve as guidance for desired standards of practice. However, it is the sole responsibility of the individual pharmacist to determine, in all circumstances, whether a higher standard is required. It is equally their responsibility to meet that standard and ensure that consumers are provided with the best available information about the current evidence for, or lack-of efficacy in, offered treatments and therapies.

So given the government has not banned homeopathic products from pharmacies, we could hope for restriction under Australian Consumer Law. They can, for example, prohibit sale of products that lack the purported constituents or qualities. But this has yet to happen with homeopathy, as it's considered misleading but harmless.

The government is putting the onus on consumers to ask the pharmacist "does this work?", and only the exceptional customer will ask.

If consumers wish to purchase therapies without a proven effect, they should be able to do so from venues that sell incense sticks and similar "wellness" paraphernalia.

They should not be available for sale in an industry necessarily regulated by government and trusted by the community.

It's time for the Guild and Society to take a stand and reject sale by their members of products that by definition do not work. If pharmacies want status, they have to skip the junk products dollar. The government should help.

Read more: Pharmacists are trusted medical professionals, so they shouldn't sell remedies that lack evidence
