University leads drive on future herbal medicine

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As new European laws governing the sale of herbal medicines come into force, the University of Birmingham is hosting a major international conference today (May 5) on the future of the regulation of complementary and alternative medicine (CAM).

Funded by The Wellcome Trust, the conference brings together experts from across the world to Birmingham to answer questions around the regulation of herbal medicine and other complementary health systems and to drive forward debate on this issue.

The question 'does the government have the right to decide what you do to manage your own health?' is driving a public backlash against a new EU directive which will mean that herbal medicines on sale in shops will have to be registered by the Medicine and Healthcare Products Regulatory Agency (MHRA).

'The rationale behind the EU directive is persuasive: there are some safety risks with herbs because of their strong action or potential interaction with conventional pharmaceutical drugs,' explains Dr Nicola Gale, Academic Lead for the Complementary and Alternative Medicine Birmingham Research Alliance, based at the University. 'However, herbs are the "traditional" medicine of the West; they are part of our heritage and have been used for many centuries to manage everything from minor health complaints to serious illness.

'The idea that people would have to consult their doctor to get access to these herbs or that there would be a dramatic restriction on the herbs available has caused widespread outcry across Europe with accusations of promoting a "nanny state", restricting individual choice and playing into the hands of pharmaceutical companies seeking profits from patenting herbal treatments. Currently, there is a campaign to protect the rights of individuals to choose their own herbal treatments on Avaaz, one of the most influential global social action websites.'

In the UK, concerted campaigning by the public and herbal medicine practitioners and patients has resulted in the UK putting in place an exemption whereby registered herbal practitioners can continue to prescribe unlicensed herbal medicines.

However, the question still remains: what level of regulation is appropriate for practitioners who prescribe herbs or other complementary health treatments?

The conference, being attended by world leaders in the field of complementary medicine, from North America, Australia, Europe and the Middle East, will address questions including: 'What, if anything, should governments be doing about regulation of complementary health practitioners?' and 'What are the priorities for improving accountability within these professions?'

The event is being hosted by Dr Nicola Gale and Prof Jean McHale, Director of the Centre for Health Law, Science and Policy at the University of Birmingham.

For more information, please contact Jenni Ameghino, University of Birmingham Press Office, 0121 415 8134.

Notes to editors

• The conference is being funded by The Wellcome Trust and is hosted by the Centre for Health Law, Science and Policy, the History of Medicine Unit, the Centre for Biomedical Ethics and The Complementary and Alternative Medicine Birmingham Research Alliance (CAMBRA) at the University of Birmingham.

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