

What's the Harm in Having Alternatives in Medicine?

KAT MCLEOD

Whenever I hear someone mention *alternative medicine*, I have an immediate negative response. However, I try to remain calm while also trying to persuade the person to seek actual medical help instead. As skeptics, we are usually very leery about “woo,” but that doesn’t mean we aren’t susceptible to being fooled, hoodwinked, and conned. When I went down the natural health product path, the industry was not regulated in Canada (and it still isn’t in the United States except for products that fall under the Dietary Supplements Health Education Act). Natural health products became regulated in Canada in 2004; however, an audit completed in December 2020 by the Office of the Auditor General of Canada (Government of Canada Auditor General 2021) shows that products are still unsafe and untested, yet 70 percent of Canadians consume them. Natural health products are considered “lower risk”—but that doesn’t mean they are safe.

When I was twenty-one, my doctor wanted to put me on oral steroids for my asthma; I was hesitant because I had seen steroids cut my grandmother’s life short. A close friend of the family recommended I see her herbalist. She and her family had been seeing him for ten years, and he was the biggest herbalist in my city, having practiced for over twenty-five years. I thought it couldn’t hurt to see what he had to say; I was so wrong. I was fascinated by how he could tell things about my health just by feeling different pulse points. He had been in the game longer than I’d been alive and had honed his craft. He was sure he could help me with my asthma and sent me home with a large bag full of loose herbs and instructions on how to boil and consume them. I went home, followed the instructions, and tried to drink the tea. It was so bitter I couldn’t swallow more than two sips. I went back to him, and this time he “prescribed” several herbs in capsules that I could take instead. I read up on all the different things he recommended and researched how they might interact with other herbs, so I *thought* I was making an informed decision.

The capsules worked! For the first time in my life, my asthma wasn’t an issue; I could be as active as I wanted without needing my inhaler. Four months into my herbal experience, I found myself breathing well but gaining weight disturbingly fast despite eating less and exercising for at least two hours a day every day. I asked the herbalist about it; he sold me more herbs. I asked my doctor about it, and she told



Figure 1. Asthma Wan is the herbal supplement that was tested by the doctors.

me she didn’t know what could be causing it, suggested I stop taking the herbs to “see what happened,” and ordered some labs. I didn’t stop taking the herbs because they seemed to be working (and had I listened to her, I may have died due to stopping so suddenly). Those lab results led to more tests and then more. I was having blood draws and lab tests every few days for the next six months. I was dizzy with the number of specialists I had been referred to; none of them had answers. I participated in a medical teaching session, where over fifty doctors from around the world came to examine me and review my case, to no avail. They had ruled out many diseases and all kinds of cancer, but they didn’t have any answers.

I was desperate for answers, so I started reading medical textbooks and figured I had Cushing’s disease—which was confirmed shortly thereafter when I met with an endocrinologist. They weren’t sure why I had developed secondary Cushing’s disease but at least I had a diagnosis. One day my



endocrinologist was having lunch with a pediatric specialist, and they were discussing their difficult cases. The pediatric doctor had three mysterious cases who didn't have the same symptoms as each other, but I had all the symptoms of all three of his patients; it turned out we were all taking the same herb (Asthma Wan), only I was taking a much higher dose. My endocrinologist asked if he could test the capsules I was taking, and it turns out they had an ingredient not listed on the packaging—cow gallstones—that were acting like a cortical steroid twelve times more potent than prednisone. I was taking nine pills a day, the equivalent of 108 prednisone daily. Mystery solved; now they had to figure out how to wean me off without killing me.

As soon as I learned it was the herbs making me sick, I informed the herbalist—who continued to sell them. I consulted a lawyer but was told because natural health products weren't regulated in Canada, my only option would be to sue the government. The doctors told me I wouldn't live long enough to see that to fruition; I opted to work with Health Canada to have regulations put in place instead.

I was told that the damage to my adrenal glands and other organs was permanent; the doctors weren't sure how I managed to survive and didn't think I would live more than a few more years. I went on a campaign to spread awareness, talking to everyone about the dangers of herbal "remedies." I was invited to speak at the University of Alberta to pharmacy students, which I did every term for a decade, alongside a representative from Health Canada. I mentor medical students and healthcare practitioners to this day. I will always deal with the consequences of my mistake, but hopefully I can be a lesson to others.

Herbalists, naturopathic "doctors," and the like bilk people out of millions of dollars each year. I am not the only one who has been harmed; thousands have, and some lost their lives ("What's the Harm in Herbal Remedies?" 2010). One of the outcomes that Health Canada agreed to after the audit concluded was including natural health products in the Unsafe

Drug Act (Vanessa's Law) (Osman 2023). Two years later, this is finally being undertaken, causing upset for some supporters of alternative remedies (Harding 2023). This industry is poorly regulated, and in many countries, it relies heavily on manufacturers/sellers to self-attest to efficacy and report any adverse reactions. In a recent episode of CBC's show *The Current*, naturopathic doctor Dugald Seely from the Centre for Health Innovation stated that "in 2017 only 0.9% of adverse reactions reported in Canada were from [natural health products]" (Galway 2023), which gives an illusion of safety, when in fact it is evidence of under-reporting. Health Canada states that only 41 percent of people who experience an adverse reaction report it (Government of Canada 2016). Some people may not realize that *it is the natural health product causing the reaction*, because there are not enough studies to understand the full scope of the risks or how products may interact with prescription drugs or food (e.g., how some antihistamines interact badly with grapefruit juice).

Consumers equate "natural" with being safe; snake bites are natural, yet I wouldn't recommend them. The healthcare system has been overburdened for too long, and many people don't have a family doctor or are frustrated by long wait times, lack of empathy, and so on, leaving them to seek alternatives. Therein lies the danger. Currently, there are no consequences for products that lack efficacy, and most adverse reactions are unreported. Even when serious adverse reactions are reported, according to the audit, it does not mean that the product won't continue to be sold without any warning to the consumer, simply because the manufacturer fails to comply. Products are widely available online, in retail stores, and in grocery stores. So long as there is a misconception about safety, people will continue to be hurt. ■

References

- Galway, Matt. 2023. Tracking bad reactions to natural health products. *The Current* (June 1). Online at <https://www.cbc.ca/listen/live-radio/1-63-the-current/clip/15988370-tracking-bad-reactions-natural-health-products-forming-relationships>.
- Government of Canada. 2016. About Natural Health Products (March 14). Online at <https://www.canada.ca/en/health-canada/services/drugs-health-products/natural-non-prescription/regulation/about-products.html>.
- Government of Canada Auditor General. 2021. *Report 2-Natural Health Products-Health Canada* (December). Online at https://www.oag-bvg.gc.ca/internet/English/parl_cesd_202104_02_e_43806.html.
- Harding, Lee. 2023. "Death knell": New regulations could spell end of natural health products industry, advocate says. *The Epoch Times* (July 3). Online at <https://www.theepochtimes.com/>.
- Osman, Laura. 2023. Industry blindsided by federal government's plan to track ill effects of natural health products. *The Canadian Press* (May 25). Online at <https://www.ctvnews.ca/health/industry-blindsided-by-federal-government-s-plan-to-track-ill-effect>.
- What's the harm in herbal remedies? 2010. What's the Harm? Online at <http://whats-the-harm.net/herbalremedies.html>.

Kat McLeod hails from Edmonton, Alberta [Canada]. She is an atheist who is passionate about dispelling misinformation, especially regarding alternative "medicine." When not working at her day job at the University of Alberta, she volunteers to mentor medical students, creates art, and enjoys mingling with other like-minded skeptics and heathens. Writing and photography have been lifelong passions; she self-published a book in 2006.