New rules for homoeopathic remedies anger UK peers

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The health of patients in the United Kingdom could be at risk after rules governing the licensing of homoeopathic medicines were changed. Members of the House of Lords have described the changes as the “abandonment of science.”

Peers in the House of Lords last week debated the changes, which allow homoeopathic medicines to make medicinal claims. In September, the Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulatory Agency (MHRA) introduced a scheme to regulate homoeopathic products in the United Kingdom, which allows manufacturers to specify the ailments that preparations can be used for.

These changes have led to an outcry from much of the scientific and medical world, says the Liberal Democrat Lord Taverne, who led the debate and called for the regulations to be annulled.

“This regulation was made explicitly for the benefit of the manufacturers of homoeopathic products,” he said. “For the first time in the history of the regulation of medical products, it allows claim of efficacy to be made without scientific evidence. It is an abandonment of science and the evidence based approach.

“When homoeopathic substances have been tested scientifically, no evidence has been found that they work any more than as a placebo. It is the equivalent of witchcraft.”

Lord Taverne, who chairs Sense about Science, a charity that promotes an evidence based approach to understanding scientific issues, said that it had been inundated with expressions of concern from organisations such as the Royal Society, the Academy of Medical Sciences, the Medical Research Council, and many others.

Arguing against Lord Taverne, the crossbench Countess of Mar said that the regulations were the result of protracted and wide consultation.

“They iron out existing anomalies and bring homoeopathic medicines into line with the 2005 legislation on traditional use of herbal medicines,” she said. “Homoeopathic medicines have been used for more than 200 years and there is wide bibliographic evidence to support their use and effectiveness.”

The Labour health minister Lord Warner of Brockley said that the new scheme would assure the public about the quality of manufacture and safety and provide them with better information about homoeopathic products.
“This scheme will improve the protection of consumers who choose to use these products and we have acted in this area in patients’ interests and not to promote commercial products.

“Because homoeopathic products are different from conventional medicines, it is right, in our view, that they are regulated in a different way. They cannot demonstrate efficacy in the same way that conventional medicinal products are required to do to obtain a licence.”

Lord Taverne, replying, said he would continue to try to get the regulation withdrawn.

After the debate, John Garrow, vice chairman of the charity HealthWatch, which promotes proper testing of all forms of treatment, said, “The MHRA was set up to safeguard the public to ensure that only licensed medicines which have been shown to be safe and effective will have a licence. I think the MHRA is bending the rules.”

A spokesperson for the MHRA said, “The new scheme provides a significant opportunity to improve consumer information about the use of homoeopathic products in the UK market while maintaining rigorous control over their quality and safety.”