

Health

ALTERNATIVE MEDICINE

New warning labels added to homeopathic vaccines

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Health Canada is cracking down on the sale of so-called homeopathic vaccines that are falsely promoted by some naturopaths and homeopaths as safer and more effective than traditional vaccines.

The department has altered the document that outlines how homeopathic vaccines should be used, saying they must now contain the following warning: "This product is not intended to be an alternative to vaccination." The document, called a product monograph, was updated on June 24, one month after The Globe and Mail published a story outlining the concerns with homeopathic vaccines.

"We're very glad ... they've tak-

en on this step," said Jamie Williams, executive director of Bad Science Watch, a Canadian advocacy organization that led a campaign against homeopathic vaccines. "We feel that it will be a help to consumers who might not have been getting the full information to make a more informed health choice before this."

Homeopathic vaccines, also known as nosodes, are made from infected saliva, feces or other material. The substance is mixed with alcohol and diluted until it is harmless, according to the homeopathic and naturopathic practitioners who sell the products. They say nosodes produce an immune response and that research shows it protects as well, if not better, than traditional vaccines.

However, the science used to back those claims is dubious. The studies are not properly randomized or controlled and the results are often erroneously interpreted to produce a positive effect, Williams said. The research backing the use of nosodes can be found in journals dedicated to homeopathy.

Health Canada has approved about 150 nosodes for sale in Canada. Although they have never been approved as alternatives to vaccines, Health Canada doesn't seem to have stopped anyone from promoting them in this fashion. Websites of numerous naturopathic and homeopathic practitioners in Canada have long touted the benefits of nosodes. Previously, the only guidance Health Canada gave

about nosodes was that they should be used on the advice of a health-care practitioner.

The major concerns are that nosodes can divert people from traditional vaccination campaigns, give people a false sense of security and hasten the spread of infectious disease, such as measles or whooping cough. It's a serious public-health issue, given that falling vaccination rates have led to outbreaks of disease in Canada and other countries where the illnesses have previously been under control.

Much of the fear over vaccines can be traced to the work of now-disgraced Dr. Andrew Wakefield, who falsely reported that the measles-mumps-rubella vaccine is linked to autism.

But after a deadly outbreak of

measles earlier this year, the British Homeopathic Association was forced to issue a statement acknowledging that traditional vaccines are the only way to reduce transmission of illness.

Williams said the move to tighten regulations around nosodes is an important step, but that there are numerous other examples of dubious natural health products on the market that need to be looked at.

He urges consumers to be vigilant in order to protect themselves from potentially problematic products and to consult with their doctors and local health authorities.

"Do not listen to somebody in a health store who's trying to sell you \$30 worth of sugar pills," he said.