

Media Release**2 December 2003**

Chinese medicines: Quantifying quality

Traditional Chinese medicines now account for 3.2% of complementary medicines used in Australia. Their increasing use has raised concerns about their safety and quality, according to an article in this month's *Australian Prescriber*.

Dr George Li, Dr Colin Duke and Professor Basil Roufogalis, of the Herbal Medicines Research and Education Centre at the University of Sydney claim that concerns have been raised because Chinese medicines have been contaminated with toxic heavy metals or combined with other drugs. The authors believe Chinese therapies require increased regulation, and research and education to ensure these products are safe and used appropriately.

Chinese medicines may have multiple active ingredients - or active ingredients that are hard to identify. This means their pharmacological activities and clinical applications are not well defined, leading to safety problems with inappropriate use, and difficulties predicting interactions and side effects.

Moreover, the influences on quality are far-ranging – including agriculture and manufacturing processes. Although Chinese herbal products are regulated by the Therapeutic Goods Administration (TGA), the imported raw materials are not.

Dr Li, Dr Duke and Professor Roufogalis recommend that raw herbs, their preparations and products are tested systematically, and that herbs with toxicity equivalent to prescription medicines should be controlled by regulation.

Other key recommendations include formal qualifications for those dispensing traditional medicines, and ensuring practitioners and pharmacists have an adequate understanding of complementary and herbal medicines in order for them to be managed safely and effectively.

This article is followed by a commentary by John McEwen and Fiona Cumming outlining the TGA's role in regulating herbs and herbal products.

Other topics in this issue of *Australian Prescriber* are prescribing for children, nutrition for surgery and calcium.

To view the complete article visit the *Australian Prescriber* web site www.australianprescriber.com. *Australian Prescriber*, an independent review providing critical commentary on therapeutic topics for health professionals, is published by the National Prescribing Service Ltd (NPS). NPS is an independent Australian organisation for Quality Use of Medicines. For further information about the NPS visit the web site www.nps.org.au

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For further information or expert commentary about this article please contact Miriam Fletcher at NPS on (02) 8217 8700 or 0417 422 420 or by email at mfletcher@nps.org.au.

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National Prescribing Service Limited | ACN 082 034 393 | ABN 61 082 034 39
Level 7/418A Elizabeth Street Surry Hills NSW

PO Box 1147 Strawberry Hills NSW 2012 | Phone: 02 8217 8700 | Fax: 02 9211 7578 | net: www.nps.org.au