New rules for homoeopathic remedies anger UK peers

Adrian O'Dowd *London*

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

Lord Taverne has branded homoeopathic remedies "the equivalent of witchcraft"

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." PH

Sex change expert accused of rushing patients into surgery

Owen Dyer *London*

Britain's best known sex change expert, consultant psychiatrist Russell Reid, ignored guidelines and rushed patients into surgery without properly assessing their needs, according to charges laid against him at the General Medical Council.

Dr Reid is accused of serious professional misconduct in the treatment of five patients, named as patients B, C, D, E, and F. Charges relating to a sixth patient, named A, were dropped in preliminary hearings because of lack of documentation.

The complainants are patient F and three psychiatrists from the gender identity clinic at the

Charing Cross Hospital in London—James Barrett, Donald Montgomery, and Richard Green—and a senior registrar at the clinic, Stuart Lorimer.

Dr Reid used to work at the clinic one day a week, but he left in 1990 to set up a private practice in Earl's Court, London. He retired in February this year.

Dr Barratt and Dr Montgomery testified that Dr Reid failed to properly assess patients before prescribing hormones. "I don't believe that his interviews are properly searching," said Dr Barrett. "In some respects they are a sort of collusion between him and the patient."

When Dr Reid learned that patient C had concealed a previous conviction for indecently assaulting a 15 year old boy, said Dr Barratt, he "appeared to proceed as if what the patient had earlier said, which was now demonstrated to be dishonest, had been true, and wrote to other people, including professionals, as if it was."

In four of the five patients'

cases, Dr Reid has acknowledged prescribing hormones at the first consultation. Dr Barratt said that the guidelines of the Harry Benjamin International Gender Dysphoria Association normally require the patient to live three months in their new gender role before beginning hormone treatment.

These guidelines provide "flexible directions" for the treatment of gender identity disorders. They are "generally recognised" but not formally endorsed by the Royal College of Psychiatrists. Both Dr Reid and the complainant Dr Green are members of the college's committee on gender identity disorder.

The guidelines stipulate a one year waiting period before surgery and a second medical opinion. Dr Reid is accused of recommending patients B, C, and D for surgery without meeting these requirements. Patients B and C both testified that they now regretted their operations.

Other patients have come

forward to publicly praise Dr Reid's treatment, however, but none has yet testified before the GMC, and several transgender support groups have set up a website backing him.

Dr Reid is also accused of suggesting to patient E that she fund her surgery by working as an escort, a charge he denies.

Patient F testified that Dr Reid prescribed her 13 months' worth of hormones at the first consultation. He also sent a letter to her GP wrongly describing her as a female to male transsexual. Patient F told the hearing that when she complained Dr Reid told her "please don't come back."

Dr Reid's counsel, Adrian Hopkins QC, told the hearing in an opening statement that the complaint was the result of a turf war over patients between the Charing Cross Hospital's gender clinic and Dr Reid's practice. The defence will present its case later in the hearing.

The case is expected to end later this month. □