

Truth Deficiency Syndrome and Semantics



A Picture of Health



Ron Law's
Public Health
Perspectives

I guess we all heard the very sad news that the actor who played the role of Sir Humphrey Appleby in 'Yes Minister' has died. Well, the news is not all that bad - his spirit lives on in Wellington. The only difference is that while Sir Humphrey had a positive therapeutic effect as a very funny actor, the Wellington variety is no joke, and it's playing with humanity's state of wellbeing and denying access to very effective and safe health care products.

When we ask, "What is the meaning of 'meaning'?" Sir Humphrey would come back and ask, cleverly, "Do you mean the meaning of the 'speaker's meaning'? Or the meaning of the 'semantic meaning'?" On February 8, at another one of these sham Trans-Tasman Australianisation meetings, where bureaucrats come from Wellington and Canberra to tell us how wonderful their empire expansion programme is marching on, (and fail to bring their ears with them), I got into a discussion of this very question with a longtime Ministry of Health bureaucrat.

This is the bureaucrat who said that, as Team Leader, (and after ten years of sham-consultation - I added that bit!), she hadn't learned a single thing and that wonderful safe and effective dietary supplements should be regulated alongside extremely poisonous substances like pharmaceutical drugs.

The conversation began by me telling the bureaucrat when she lost my trust. At a meeting in May 2000, in the Minister of Health's office, Ministry of Health officials told the Minister, Annette King, and industry officials (including myself) that the proposed Health care and Therapeutic Products Bill was on track for introduction to the House in November 2000. In September, the Minister commented publicly that it was still on track for a November tabling in Parliament. (Ministers never comment without official advice.) November came and went, Christmas came and went. Then, out of left field, came a report quoting the Minister as saying the Health care and Therapeutic Products Bill was to be put on hold pending the outcomes of the Trans-Tasman (Australianisation) process. Needless to say, I was furious.

Under the Official Information Act, copies of all Ministry of Health documents relating to the Trans-Tasman Australianisation process were requested. To my horror, access was denied to 26 such documents as their release "could jeopardise Trans-Tasman relations". There was, however, one really significant paragraph in the fragment of one document that had not been blacked out. This document was dated July 1999, 10 months prior to the meeting with the Minister. The fragment said that Australia insisted on New Zealand putting the Health care and Therapeutic Products Bill into abeyance "as a measure of good faith" regarding progress of the Trans-Tasman Australianisation process. In fact, the officials even wrote a letter to the Australian Minister for the previous NZ

Minister of Health to sign. Remember, this is 10 months BEFORE telling the Minister and industry officials that all was sweet and that the new legislation was on track.

When confronted with this, the immediate response from the official was that it was not a lie, but rather a matter of semantics. There wasn't even a blink - Sir Humphrey would have been so proud. I'm still shaking my head in disbelief.

It's really sad when officials cannot be trusted. Officials give the bureaucratic fingers to the government's own code of Good Regulatory Practice, which is supposed to promote clarity and prevent such corruption (sorry - semantics, silly me).

In this case, it's quite clear we were all misled - including the Minister, or should I say, there appears to have been a major demonstration of classical truth deficiency syndrome - apparently it's contagious and incurable in bureaucracies.

Another example of what the dietary supplement industry is up against is in quotes attributed to another Ministry of Health bureaucrat, in the February 8 NZ Herald. The Ministry has warned women on the pill to consult their doctor before taking St John's wort. This advice came after the first two reports ever, in the whole world, of pregnancy among pill users who take SJW. The Ministry fails to mention that 0.5 per cent of all women on the pill for a year get pregnant. That's 5,000 pregnancies for every one million on the pill. Several hundred million women are on the pill meaning that there would be several times greater than 500,000 pregnancies from pill failure every year around the world - and the Ministry issues a warning when two of those just happen to have coincided with consumption of St John's wort. It's estimated that at least 10 million women use St John's wort in a given year.

Here's what the Ministry of Health and their colleagues have said about the thousands of adverse reactions and 100 or so deaths associated with a very popular pharmaceutical drug. The Australian TGA (these are the ones the Ministry of Health is trying to get us into bed with) said, "The very high usage of bupropion in a short time has highlighted several possible adverse effects, some of which may be severe ... The Adverse Drug Reactions Advisory Committee (ADRAC) has received 1237 Australian reports of suspected adverse reactions in connection with the use of Zyban SR. In 1215 of these, Zyban SR was implicated as the sole suspected drug (that's 98 per cent ...). Recent media coverage has highlighted a small number of Australian reports to ADRAC of suspected adverse reactions to bupropion where the patient died." (Note: There have been at least 18 deaths in Australia alone and this was trivialised as being small in number.)

The UK Medicines Control Agency: "An estimated 500,000 people so far have taken the drug in Britain where it accounts for ▶

◀ a third of all reported adverse drug reactions ... Up to 10 January 2002, a total of 6975 reports of *suspected* adverse reactions have been received ... There have been 57 reports of *suspected* adverse reactions to Zyban which had a fatal outcome ... It is important to note that the *suspected* reactions are not necessarily caused by the drug and may relate to other factors such as nicotine withdrawal, other illnesses or other medicines taken concurrently ... The contribution of Zyban to these fatal cases is unproven." In all cases, the reports were highlighted as being "suspected" even though they account for a third of all adverse reports!

The New Zealand Ministry of Health, after examining 218 adverse reaction reports in New Zealand as well as the overseas data, concluded, "No definite link between bupropion and deaths." How absurd, especially when two reported (causality not established at all) pregnancies (not even deaths) occurred in women, on the other side of the planet, who just happened to be using St John's wort. As a result, the Ministry goes into muckraking mode and makes negative public comment and conveniently ignores the fact that 500,000 women get pregnant from oral contraception failure every year around the world – five million pregnancies over the past decade.

This is the same Ministry of Health whose official statistics on injury have all been corrupted by having the medical injury data removed before publication, despite medical injury being the second highest specific cause of death, years of lost life, and disability in New Zealand – more than lung cancer, breast cancer, prostate cancer and diabetes!

When the Ministry of Health's Information Service was asked to explain why these figures were stripped from their statistics, they

said that people weren't really interested and that it would only confuse them!

Medical injury and complications are the leading category of discharges involving injuries in New Zealand, accounting for 26 per cent (28,359) of discharges from publicly-funded hospitals involving injury. This is more than from falls and 300 per cent more than for car accidents! And yet this data is deliberately and systematically removed from official Ministry of Health injury statistics. This is corruption of the highest order!

Sir Humphrey would be very proud of the Ministry for its ability to survive despite suffering from apparently incurable Truth Deficiency Syndrome. The Ministry explains away, ignores or obfuscates evidence of the very things that are killing New Zealanders by the thousands, and focuses on muckraking when 0.0004 per cent of unintentional pregnancies just happen to coincide with the use of a herb that has been used for several 1000 years without problems. Poisonous substances like pharmaceutical drugs are a hundred thousand times more dangerous than dietary supplements, yet the regulators want to regulate them both in the same breath as in Australia. What are we missing here?

When successive Ministers of the Crown, and the public of New Zealand, become victims of Bureaucratic Truth Deficiency Syndrome that results in bad policy, something is terribly, terribly wrong. It's time health regulators came clean.

It's time for a Royal Commission into our terminally sick Public Health system before we sell our sovereignty and our soul to the even more corrupt Australian system.