

## Bitter pills

New Health Canada regulations will force many natural health products off shelves

BY MICHELLE ERVIN

Canadians stand to lose access to thousands of natural health products currently on shelves once federal regulations are strictly enforced, warns one advocacy group.

As Health Canada prepares to adopt a new compliance and enforcement policy for its Natural Health Products Regulations this fall, the Natural Health Products Protection Association (NHPPA) is campaigning to put a freeze on current rules that treat goods ranging from vitamins and minerals to herbal remedies like drugs.

The regulations—meant to balance consumer choice with safety and efficacy—

began in 2004 to prohibit the sale of any natural health product not licensed by Health Canada. From then until last December, more than 40 percent of all completed licence applications have been refused or withdrawn.

Shawn Buckley, NHPPA president, stresses that most products fail because manufacturers are forced to make a health claim they couldn't otherwise make if not classified as a pharmaceutical drug. The NHPPA would like to see all natural health products deemed legal unless Health Canada can prove they pose a safety risk.

For the past six years, Health Canada has adhered to a risk-based compliance policy that set target dates for different categories of natural health products. While this transition period was set to end December 31, 2009, a Health Canada spokesperson explains that a backlog of product licence applications has kept the Natural Health Products Directorate busy and so far enforcement has been a low priority.

As a result, manufacturers continue to sell their products as their applications are

reviewed and products with denied applications can still be found on store shelves. But with the backlog of applications set to be cleared by the end of 2010 and the fall roll-out of Health Canada's new compliance policy, this is expected to change.

Currently, Health Canada is quiet on how exactly it will enforce the new compliance policy; it will only say that its enforcement priority will be higher-risk products, such as those that bear unapproved claims regarding serious diseases.

But Buckley believes that many of the more innovative, multi-ingredient treatments, which are tougher to get licensed, will vanish. This could happen either because of enforcement or because store owners, worried they may eventually face such penalties as fines, have pulled them off the shelves.

Angie Shand, the dispensary manager at Gaia Garden Herbs, has already started to do just that. A popular, multi-ingredient arthritis treatment called Bone, Flesh & Cartilage (BFC) is likely to go, she says, as she doubts it will be able to win Health Canada's approval.

"On the ground, what's happening is a disaster for the natural health industry and, I think, for Canadians' health," says Buckley.

## WHATEVER HAPPENED TO...

GARY FREEMAN/JOSEPH PANNELL

## Nowhere man

The 60s radical-turned-librarian has done his time, but Canada won't let him come home BY WENDY GLAUSER



**He was branded Canada's** very own Black Panther. In 2004, Gary Freeman, born Joseph Pannell, was arrested by Toronto police at gunpoint outside of his workplace, the Toronto Reference Library. It turned out that this friendly library assistant, father, and husband was harbouring a secret past. In Chicago in 1969, he had shot a cop three times, leaving him with a partially paralyzed arm. He then skipped bail and fled to Canada.

Juicy story. But there's no evidence Freeman was a Black Panther Party (BPP) member. He denies it. Former party members haven't heard of him. And U.S. authorities didn't even attempt to link him to the group in their criminal proceedings against him. The case itself was also rife with irregularities. The injured officer's account of the incident was inconsistent, which mainstream media never reported on, and he was also the case's investigating officer—a major conflict of interest.

Although Freeman knew a trial would reveal the holes in the evidence and the reality of police brutality against blacks at

the time, he accepted a plea bargain in 2008. At that point, he'd spent years in pre-extradition custody and he just wanted it to be over. Freeman served 30 days in the U.S. and paid a fine of \$250,000, which went to a charity chosen by the injured officer. But despite this, Freeman is unable to resume his life in Toronto with his family.

Canadian authorities won't let him back in, claiming he is linked to a "terrorist organization," the Black Panthers. But the only evidence the government has provided to substantiate its claim is news stories; furthermore, BPP is not even designated a terrorist organization in Canada, and other members, including former Panther Angela Davis, cross the border without incident.

Last fall, Freeman was even denied permission to visit his dying father-in-law, with whom he was extremely close, and was later prevented from attending his funeral.

"It's so cruel, we really don't understand," says Freeman's wife, Natercia Coelho, who visits her husband at his parents' house in Washington, D.C. as often as she can. Their four children also visit when able, but the distance weighs on the family. They continue to fight for Freeman's return by circulating petitions and sending letters asking authorities to allow him in on humanitarian grounds.

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