

The taxation of SUPPLEMENTS

Why are health-conscious Canadians being punished ?

| **Shawn Buckley**

When governments want to reduce a behaviour, they make it costly by taxing it. When they want to encourage a behaviour, they avoid or reduce tax. Why is our federal government using taxation to encourage us to use prescription drugs and to discourage us from taking natural supplements?

The question is an important one not only because it affects our pocketbook, but also because it affects our health. Our tax system is set up to funnel us into the mainstream medical system at the expense of other treatments.

This is an interesting policy choice. Our mainstream medical system is allopathic: focused on treating the symptoms of disease as opposed to preventing disease. This is an over-simplification. But, if you go through Health Canada's prescription drug list and see the myriad drugs that treat symptoms rather than prevent illness, you will understand my point that our medical system is

allopathic. By contrast, natural health practitioners and natural supplements focus more on prevention.

The two systems are treated very differently. We don't pay to see our medical doctors, but we pay to see natural practitioners. There is no GST on prescription drugs, but there is on natural supplements. Prescription drugs paid for by a medical plan are not taxable benefits; most supplements are.

Persons too poor to pay for natural treatments cannot access them. The rest of us are discouraged from doing so by our national financial policy.

This is poor policy for several reasons. First, most of us want to prevent illness rather than treat its symptoms. Prevention is worth a pound of cure not only financially, but also in quality of life.

Second, despite their benefits, prescription drugs are almost always more risky than natural supplements. Encouraging risky treatments is unsettling behaviour on the part of a government.

Third, Canadians should have the right to choose how they are going to treat themselves. Instead, government policy chooses for the poor, even in those cases where natural remedies would be more effective.

Finally, we should be encouraging Canadians to live a healthy lifestyle and to be proactive with their health. Current federal policy discourages this.

The best way to get policy changed is by making it clear that we want a change. I would encourage all who want natural treatments on a level playing field with prescription drugs to contact their Member of Parliament (MP). MPs are like the rest of us. Visits impact them more than calls. Letters send a stronger message than emails. For this policy change, I also suggest contacting the Minister of Health, the Minister of Finance, and the Prime Minister.

Positive change happens when passionate people push for it. Let's push for a positive change. **a**

Shawn Buckley is a lawyer who works to protect access to natural health products. He is also president of the Natural Health Products Protection Association.