



NEWS

Prince Charles delayed regulation of herbal medicines

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The Prince of Wales won influence over Prime Minister Tony Blair and delayed the introduction of regulations governing the sale of herbal medicines, letters between the heir to the throne and government ministers have revealed.

The prince wrote to the then prime minister in February 2005 about the European Union's Directive on Herbal Medicines, claiming that it was having "a deleterious effect on complementary medicine sector in this country by effectively outlawing the use of certain herbal extracts."

The 27 letters were released on 13 May after orders from the Supreme Court in response to a freedom of information request submitted by the *Guardian* newspaper 10 years ago.

The EU directive was passed in 2004 after concerns over several cases of harm. It required all new herbal products to be authorised before they could go on sale in the EU, although existing products did not require authorisation until 2011. However, only herbal products that had been in use in the EU for 15 of the past 30 years qualified for authorisation, which meant that some ayurvedic and traditional Chinese remedies would be banned from sale.

In the letter Prince Charles said that after a meeting with Blair "we both agreed this was using a sledgehammer to crack a nut." He recommended that some of his associates, including the chief executive of his Foundation for Integrated Health, should brief Blair's advisers on the subject. The foundation closed in 2010.

At the end of March 2005 Blair replied to Prince Charles's letter, thanking him for the "sensible and constructive" contacts. Blair said that he agreed that the "implementation as it is currently planned is crazy."

He added, "We can do quite a lot here: we will delay the implementation for all existing products to 2011."

Blair also promised Prince Charles that the government would "take more of the implementation upon ourselves" and would

consult the prince's contacts because "we simply cannot have burdensome regulations here."

In the end the United Kingdom allowed products that would have been banned under the EU directive to remain on the shelves for many years by circumventing the rules.

Simon Singh, coauthor of *Trick or Treatment?*, a book that analysed alternative medicine, said, "These letters are almost certainly just the tip of the iceberg. We have no idea how much HRH [his royal highness] has been influencing policy via unreleased memos, during private meetings and via his now defunct Prince's Foundation for Integrated Health. In a democracy it is fundamentally wrong that an accident of birth should enable someone to have secret influence upon those who determine health policy."

"Herbal medicine can work in a few instances, but in the majority of cases it is unproven, disproven, or downright dangerous, which is why the EU Directive on Herbal Medicines is so important and why HRH's desire to delay implementation was so foolish."

Edzard Ernst, former professor of complementary medicine at Exeter University, had many publicised disagreements with Prince Charles over homeopathy and the integration of complementary medicine in the NHS. He told *The BMJ*, "It is clearly unconstitutional of Charles to try influencing UK health policy. He did that when he commissioned the 'Smallwood report,' which erroneously claimed that the NHS could save millions by using more alternative medicine, when he lobbied the health secretary, Jeremy Hunt, in favour of homeopathy, and as he wrote his 'spider memos.' We know that his interventions are successful—sadly, though, not in making our healthcare better. It is time that his meddling stops or, at the very least, is fully disclosed."

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