

Health Products for Seniors

“Anti-Aging” Products Pose Potential for Physical and Economic Harm

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Health Care Issues

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Swindlers, Hucksters and Snake Oil Salesmen...

- ...The Hype and Hope of Marketing Anti-Aging Products to Seniors
- U.S. Senate Special Committee on Aging Hearing, Chaired by Sen. John Breaux
- Sept. 10, 2001

(<http://aging.senate.gov/events/091001.html>)

Background

- Dietary supplements are widely used by seniors
 - Seniors may be at particular risk because of chronic health problems and use of prescription drugs
 - Dietary Supplements Health and Education Act (DSHEA)
 - No FDA review of safety and efficacy prior to marketing
 - Manufacturers not required to register with FDA or report adverse events
 - FDA can initiate action to remove dangerous products
 - Products can not claim to treat or cure disease
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Questions

- Is there evidence that anti-aging and alternative medicine products, particularly dietary supplements aimed at conditions of aging, cause physical harm to seniors?
 - Is there evidence that questionable anti-aging and alternative medicine products cause economic harm to seniors?
 - What are the state and federal oversight efforts to protect consumers from questionable anti-aging and alternative medicine products?
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There are Some Health Risks for Seniors

- Health risks of product use:
 - Some products may have serious adverse events (FDA warnings and alerts)
 - Contraindications for seniors with pre-existing conditions
 - Interactions with prescription drugs
 - Concern that users of alternative therapies will forgo medical treatment
 - Product quality:
 - Contamination
 - Variation in amount of active ingredient
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Seniors Spend Money on Unproven or Poorly Manufactured Products

- No overall estimates
 - According to FTC, \$36 million annually on products for 20 companies that fraudulently marketed unproven health products to seniors
 - For example, “rife machines” for up to \$5,000 on the Internet
- Some dietary supplements contain less of the active ingredient than noted on product labels
 - For example, one study from an independent lab found 22% of tested dietary supplements had substantially less of the active ingredient

Government Education and Research Efforts

- Education
 - FDA outreach to senior health fairs and conferences with tips to avoid health fraud
 - FTC consumer education materials
- Research
 - NIH – National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine

Dangerous Products Still Available Despite FDA Enforcement Efforts

- FDA has taken action, on a case-by-case basis against unapproved new drugs or medical devices, and against products claimed to cure disease
- But problematic products still available because FDA has not prohibited the marketing of dangerous substances
 - Under DSHEA, FDA must prove an imminent hazard in court
 - For example, comfrey
 - July 2001 FDA advisory letter to trade associations: comfrey is dangerous, any product with comfrey is adulterated, stop selling
 - But, comfrey is still widely available on the Internet

Other Federal and State Enforcement Efforts

- FTC enforces statutes that prohibit misleading and unsubstantiated advertising
 - 1998 guidance to industry – objective product claims must be substantiated
 - Joint FTC and FDA actions against questionable Internet advertising – “Operation Cure.All”
 - Companies sometimes respond to FTC complaints by altering advertisements, but continue to sell product
 - Limited state efforts to protect consumers from fraudulent advertisements for products
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