

Beware of “natural” products

The article “Probiotics might not be what they seem”¹ in the April issue brought to light several interesting and important points. It illustrated the unreliable nature of many so-called “natural” and “probiotic” products and the inability of Health Canada to properly regulate and enforce labeling standards. It also illustrated an interest of family physicians in an area of science that has seen exponential growth these past 5 years. Some further insight is required, however, before accepting the article’s contents and conclusions.

The term probiotics is defined by a United Nations and World Health Organization Expert Panel as “Live microorganisms which when administered in adequate amounts confer a health benefit on the host.”² Subsequent guidelines outline further what represents a probiotic.³ Of the 10 products tested by Dr Huff, sadly none are proven probiotics. In other words, they have not been proven to confer specific health benefits as documented by peer-reviewed clinical studies. Of note, Natural Factors only claim viable count at time of manufacture, thus their claims are not strictly false, just misleading. They also state on their website that “products are manufactured according to Canadian Health Protection Branch Good Manufacturing Practices (GMP), among the highest standards in the world,” which could make a purchaser conclude that they are outstanding probiotics, when in fact they have never published clinical evidence on their specific strains. The critical factor that separates good manufacturers from those using good manufacturing processes, is the excipients or encapsulation or packaging that protect the organisms from air and moisture. Some products should be refrigerated but are not for marketing presence in stores, while others could have new beadlike capsules that might not even release the organisms in the gut.

Such is the state of legislation in Canada. There are products being sold here that make illegal

claims, yet they are not challenged or removed. This is especially true with Internet claims, where companies, such as Nutrition Now, reference a range of published papers, none of which used Nutrition Now strains, to suggest to consumers that their product will benefit people with high cholesterol, diarrhea, ulcerative colitis, and irritable bowel syndrome. No good data exist for probiotics in irritable bowel syndrome, so it is a pity that Nutrition Now does not spend a portion of their revenues on such clinical studies to verify any clinical benefits. At present, there is essentially only one proven probiotic product available in this country: VSL#3 for inflammatory bowel disease,⁴ and possibly Fermalac, albeit with only one clinical trial on its vaginal use.⁵ Thus, Dr Huff has uncovered real problems, but her final conclusion needs to be revised, as some probiotics are indeed worthy of recommending, even though few are available in Canada.

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Competing interest

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