

## Health Canada licenses homeopathic vaccines

**V**accines stand out as one of the most cost-effective health interventions in modern medicine.<sup>1</sup> It is estimated that immunizations have saved more Canadian lives over the last 50 years than any other health program.<sup>1</sup> Vaccines are credited with reducing the death rate from infections in Canada to only 5%<sup>2</sup>—a far cry from the situation 100 years ago when infectious diseases were the leading cause of death.

But there is a downside to the near eradication of vaccine-preventable illnesses. Most Canadians were born too recently to see the night-and-day difference in public health brought about by immunizations—individuals who witnessed the horrors of the polio epidemics of the 1950s first hand are now well into old age, and many have passed away. Good health can be taken for granted when the public does not properly understand the link between that same good health and the measures that made it possible, and unfortunately, history and science cannot always conquer misinformation, mistrust, and fear.

Much of the current antivaccine sentiment in public discourse results from widely publicized (and now discredited) pseudo-scientific reports of adverse outcomes. The 1998 claim by UK physician Dr Andrew Wakefield that the MMR vaccine caused autism contributed to a collapse in uptake of MMR vaccine in the UK<sup>3</sup> and a subsequent surge in rubella cases in unimmunized children.

Experts estimate that herd immunity is achieved when 95% of a population has been immunized. Canadian immunization rates have fallen in

recent years to levels well below this threshold. Canada's Public Health Agency estimates that only 62% of 2-year-olds are up to date with their shots.<sup>4</sup>

It is disheartening enough that misinformation about vaccines is spread by voices ranging from outspoken celebrities like Jennifer MacCarthy<sup>5</sup> to various alternative medicine trades,<sup>6</sup> but it is cause for urgent concern when public institutions entrusted with the health of Canadians enable misinformation about endemic communicable diseases to go forward with the immaturity of science.

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their shots.**

Health Canada is responsible for ensuring that remedies sold to the public are both safe and effective. In recent years, however, Health Canada has allowed various natural health products to enter the market without requiring rigorous proof of effectiveness. Indeed, there are many remedies and homeopathic preparations currently licensed for sale that do not contain any of the allegedly active ingredient. A number of these are homeopathic “nosodes.” These are ultradilute (typically diluted far beyond the point where anything is left except solvent) preparations of infectious agents or infected tissue, and are administered as an “oral vaccine.”<sup>7</sup> Although real vaccines use low doses of part of an infectious agent to pre-

vent disease, homeopathic preparations typically are diluted beyond the point where a single molecule remains.

Remarkably, at the same time as Health Canada focuses on influenza education, flu shots, and other proven prevention measures, that same body has licensed 10 products with a homeopathic preparation called “influenzinum.”<sup>8</sup> According to providers, influenza is for “preventing the flu and its related symptoms.”<sup>9</sup>

Homeopathic vaccines are available for other infectious diseases as well. Health Canada licenses homeopathic preparations purported to prevent polio,<sup>10</sup> measles,<sup>11</sup> and pertussis.<sup>12</sup>

Health Canada continues to assure Canadians that it tests products for safety and efficacy before allowing them to enter the market. All approved homeopathic products are given a DIN-HM number. The website states, “A NPN or DIN-HM means that the product has been authorized for sale in Canada and is safe and effective when used according to the instructions on the label.”<sup>13</sup>

Natural health products are big business, and the voice of providers is never far from the ear of government. While patients are free to make health decisions, government has a duty to ensure that false or misleading claims do not interfere with consumers' ability to make an informed choice. Nowhere is the case more clear than in the realm of unproven vaccines for serious illnesses. When it comes to homeopathic vaccines, Health Canada needs to stop diluting its standards.

**—Lloyd Oppel, MD  
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### References

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## worksafebc

### How to get help from a WorkSafeBC medical advisor

If you require assistance with medical issues pertaining to patients who are injured workers, WorkSafeBC medical advisors are available for consultation throughout the province.

Here are two ways you can reach a WorkSafeBC medical advisor:

Indicate on your Form 8/11 that you wish to be contacted. Under the "Return-to-Work Planning" box, check "yes" in response to the question, "Do you wish to consult with a WCB Physician or Nurse Advisor?" In the clinical section of the form, briefly outline the nature of your request. For example, indicate whether you're looking for an expedited MRI, a rehabilitation program, or disability management. Medical advisors do not see every

form, so your query is more likely to be addressed by checking the request box and indicating your specific need on the form.

Phone the nearest WorkSafeBC office and ask to speak with a medical advisor, or contact the medical advisor directly. You can also contact a medical advisor if you have yet to receive a timely call following a request for consultation on your Form 8/11. Refer to the directory on the following page, which lists the names, addresses, and phone numbers of medical advisors throughout BC.

Remember that telephone calls with WorkSafeBC personnel are billable, provided they advance your patient's care or claim. Use billing code 19508 when you speak with a medical advisor, or billing code 19930 in discussions with other WorkSafeBC officers.

Medical advisors will not be able to assist you with questions concerning non-medical claim-related issues, such as billing or claim adjudication. However, if you are not sure who you should contact for claim-related questions, you can ask a medical advisor.

We have noticed that some electronic medical records systems are defaulted to automatically check the box requesting consultation with a medical advisor. Please check your forms and, if possible, turn off this default setting so you don't receive any unnecessary calls.

To reach any WorkSafeBC medical advisor you can also call the central medical services desk at 604 244-6224 for the advisor's phone number and any other necessary contact information.

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