



Supplementary Professional  
Guidance for Pharmacists in  
Northern Ireland on the  
provision of homeopathic  
products within a pharmacy

November 2010

## **STATUS OF THIS DOCUMENT**

This document provides information and professional guidance to pharmacists in Northern Ireland on the provision of homeopathic products within a pharmacy.

### **1. BACKGROUND**

This guidance has been produced following public consultation between April and June 2010. It takes account of:

- the views, opinions and information provided by respondents to that consultation (including pharmacists and homeopaths);
- the July 2010 response of the Government to the House of Commons Science and Technology Committee's Report on Homeopathy<sup>1</sup>; and,
- the considerations of the Legislation, Standards and Practice Committee.

### **2. PURPOSE OF THE SUPPLEMENTARY GUIDANCE**

The guidance has been published with the objective of supporting pharmacists in upholding the ethical obligations of the pharmacy profession, including

- making the safety and welfare of patients their prime concern;
- showing respect for others
- exercising professional judgement in the interests of patients and the public
- encouraging patients (and or/their carers as appropriate) to participate in decisions about their care
- maintaining and developing professional knowledge and competence
- acting with honesty and integrity; and,
- providing a high standard of care at all times<sup>2</sup>

In determining whether to supply homeopathic products, and the manner in which to do so, a pharmacist should use their professional judgement in light of the principles of the Code, evaluate the risks and benefits associated with possible courses of action, and justify their actions if asked to do so.

### **3. WHY IS THIS SUPPLEMENTARY GUIDANCE?**

This guidance supplements the 2009 Standards and Guidance for Pharmacists on the Sale and Supply of Medicines<sup>3</sup>, which states:

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<sup>1</sup>

[http://www.dh.gov.uk/en/Publicationsandstatistics/Publications/PublicationsPolicyAndGuidance/DH\\_117810](http://www.dh.gov.uk/en/Publicationsandstatistics/Publications/PublicationsPolicyAndGuidance/DH_117810)

<sup>2</sup> See Code of Ethics for Pharmacists in Northern Ireland: <http://www.psni.org.uk/professionals/code-of-ethics.php>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.psni.org.uk/documents/313/Standards+on+Sale+and+Supply+of+Medicines.pdf>

*“If the pharmacy sells or supplies homeopathic or herbal medicines, or other complementary therapies, the pharmacist must:*

- *Assist patients in making informed decisions by providing them with necessary and relevant information;*
- *Ensure any stock is obtained from a reputable source;*
- *Recommend a remedy only where he can be satisfied of its safety and quality, taking into account the MHRA registration schemes for homeopathic and herbal medicines.”*

Other Standards documents remind pharmacists of a patient’s right to refuse care, treatment, or a professional service - including more established pharmaceutical treatments for ailments and conditions (Standards on Patient Consent).

The full list of Professional Standards and Guidance documents for pharmacists in Northern Ireland can be accessed from the URL below:

<http://www.psni.org.uk/professionals/code-of-ethics.php>

#### 4. WHAT IS HOMEOPATHY?

Homeopathy is a form of complementary therapy on based on treating the individual with highly diluted substances given in mainly tablet form. It works on the principle of “like cures like” - that is, a substance that would cause symptoms in a healthy person is used to cure those same symptoms in illness. For example, one remedy which might be used in a person suffering from insomnia is *coffea*, a remedy made from coffee.

It should not be confused with other forms of complementary therapy such as herbal medicine or traditional chinese medicine, treatments which often contain active medicinal ingredients.

#### 5. CAN PHARMACISTS SELL HOMEOPATHIC PRODUCTS IN A PHARMACY?

Yes, it is permissible for pharmacists to sell homeopathic products in a pharmacy and the right to produce homeopathic products is protected by both UK legislation and European law<sup>4</sup>. However, opinion on the scientific or clinical evidence base for the efficacy of homeopathic products remains divided. **It is therefore advisable that pharmacists, as publicly recognised experts in medicine, and under ethical obligations to act with honesty and integrity, inform patients purchasing homeopathic products that this is the case, and appropriately question the patient in relation to any symptoms of ill health they may be experiencing.**

Although it is for individual patients to make decisions about their healthcare, pharmacists have an important role in ensuring that these decisions are informed, and that patients have access to objective information to assist their decisions.

Pharmacists should be aware that whilst the MHRA currently licence some homeopathic products, their assessment is only for safety and quality<sup>5</sup>. The MHRA licence is not an indication of efficacy.

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.mhra.gov.uk/Howweregulate/Medicines/Homeopathicmedicines/CON009377>

<sup>5</sup>

<http://www.mhra.gov.uk/Committees/Medicinesadvisorybodies/AdvisoryBoardontheRegistrationofHomeopathicProducts/index.htm>

As set out in the Code of Ethics for pharmacists in Northern Ireland, pharmacists should only practise within their realm of competency and refer to others where necessary. This should be borne in mind when deciding to provide homeopathic products in a pharmacy. Pharmacists should always seek to be in a position to answer questions from patients in relation to medicinal and non-medicinal products available from pharmacy. Pharmacists who sell and supply homeopathic products should therefore consider any additional training and education required to ensure a professional service is provided to the public.

### **GOOD PRACTICE GUIDANCE**

Where homeopathic products are available in a pharmacy, good practice is to:

1. ensure that a patient who purchases a homeopathic product/s is appropriately informed that expert opinion on the scientific or clinical evidence base for the efficacy of homeopathic products remains divided
2. host shelf signage close to the products, recommending the patient seek further advice from the pharmacist before purchase
3. include protocols for the sales of homeopathic products within the Pharmacy Procedures (See Responsible Pharmacist Standards and Guidance). These should include appropriate questioning of the patient's symptoms
4. ensure that pharmacists providing homeopathic products to the public have a satisfactory level of knowledge about the subject in order to answer queries effectively and advise about appropriate use.

### **6. ARE THERE RISKS IN SELLING AND SUPPLYING HOMEOPATHIC PRODUCTS?**

Yes. The principle risk attributable to a patient choosing a homeopathic product to treat an ailment or symptom is that a serious underlying condition may go undiagnosed and not be treated appropriately, thereby risking the condition needlessly becoming worse. Pharmacists must be alert to this danger and interrogate the patient's reported symptoms or health complaint accordingly. A similar risk is that a patient, having consulted appropriate health professionals and been placed on a course of conventional treatment, discontinues the prescribed therapy in preference to a homeopathic course of treatment.

Another risk is borne from patients taking homeopathic products in the belief they are effective disease preventatives. One cited example is members of the public taking homeopathic products to prevent malaria. The Health Protection Agency Advisory Committee on Malaria Prevention<sup>6</sup> does not recommend that patients rely on herbal or homeopathic remedies for the prevention of malaria as there is no scientific proof that these are effective in either preventing or treating malaria. In addition, the Faculty of Homeopathy does not promote the use of homeopathy for the prevention of malaria<sup>7</sup>.

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.hpa.org.uk/HPA/Topics/InfectiousDiseases/InfectionsAZ/1191942128246/>

<sup>7</sup> [http://www.facultyofhomeopathy.org/media/position\\_statements/malaria.html](http://www.facultyofhomeopathy.org/media/position_statements/malaria.html)