

The newly appointed Minister of State for Justice, Liberal Democrat MP Simon Hughes calls for secondary legislation to speed up the statutory regulations of Traditional Medical Practitioners in the UK.

The Deputy Leader of the Liberal Democrats and MP for Bermondsey and Old Southwark hosted a meeting of over 100 Ayurvedic Medical Doctors and Practitioners in the House of Commons on Thursday 16th January 2014 supported by General Ayurveda Council (formally Save Herbal Medicine Campaign). He heard concerns from over the delay in a statement made by former Health Minister Andrew Lansley in February 2011 to statutory regulate Herbal Practitioners in the UK in order to safeguard the public.

Mr Hughes acknowledged that Ayurvedic Medicine was a complete system of healing which has been successfully practised in India and Sri Lanka for more than three thousand years and agreed that the issue of statutory regulation had been on the agenda for too long. He said, “It is in the interests of the consumer to know who is a professional (herbal practitioner) and in the interests of the profession to be regulated as well as the interests of research.”

Ayurvedic Practitioners spoke of their frustration that despite several Committees, at considerable expense to the taxpayer over the last 14 years who have *all* opted in favour of regulation, yet another Committee is being set up by the Government to investigate the process; A move which will further delay statutory regulation and put the public at risk of seeking advice from untrained herbalists.

Mr Hughes agreed that the Government was *obliged* to honour Mr Lansley’s statement but “if it is to become a reality, it would need to be done before the next General Election in May 2015”. He said a Parliamentary Bill on the issue was a lengthy and unnecessary process and called for secondary legislation to be the best way forward.

Mr Hughes went on to stress that any regulation would have to work within the context of the European Parliament; common standards across member states should enable people as well as professions to move around. However, the timing was not great as the European Parliament is up for re-election this year. Mr Hughes said he would prepare a note about his discussions and

concerns of Ayurvedic Practitioners to the Department of Health and suggested a follow up meeting in June 2014 at a time when Parliament is sitting.

His Holiness Dr Vasanth Vijay Maharaj, a Jain Guru from Tamil Nadu, southern state of India spoke of the bounty of Ayurvedic plants and their incredible healing powers. In his ashram, he had arranged an exhibition of 22 thousand plants, where 7000 people attended. He was inspired by a book of 3 volumes called “Flowers” written by an Indian lady Ayurvedic doctor from Pondicherry.

Dr Venkata N Joshi representing College of Ayurveda UK, spoke of seva or serving the community and said there was a great need to do voluntary work particularly with the elderly. He said we should focus on the mind and mind medicine, which does not require statutory regulation. Stress, anxiety, depression – mental illness and loneliness was rife and so many patients feel disenfranchised from the medical system, which often just looks at the body. Ayurveda has so much to offer in this field and often only requires kindness, love, compassion, and open heart and the art of listening.

Dr. Prathima Nagesh of Ayurvedic Medical Association UK, spoke about an integrated approach for the medicine of the future. She wants equal representation of all medicines systems that may help to speed the patient’s recovery and reduce long-term complications. She also spoke about how an integrated approach would reduce overall cost of treatments.

Entrepreneur Muneet Dohil who set up an Ayurvedic Spa about 15 years ago in the UK spoke about the problems his business is facing. He employs 12 Ayurvedic doctors and practitioners but it is difficult to employ suitably trained staff especially acquiring work permits for Indian/Sri Lankan skilled labour. He said the THMPD has stopped him from delivering the best herbal solution – from topical to internal for his clients. He has had to rely on the products he brought before the legislation and has until April 2014 to use them up and worries what he can do next.

Rosy Kalliabetsos from Holistic Therapy Magazine, said patients have a right to choose how they want to be healed/treated and claimed the “Government did not have a right to say what is and what is not safe”. She believes there has been a media boycott on

the issue. We should be able to work together to save the NHS a lot of money.

Dr Godagama who was the first Ayurvedic Doctor in the UK who currently is on the Herbal Medicine Advisory Committee, which issues licenses and gives validity to medicinal products. Dr Godagama helped to set up the College of Ayurveda with Dr Athique. He said for the last 14 years there have been 4 working parties set up at considerable expense, which have all come to the same conclusion i.e. favouring statutory regulation of herbal practitioners. Ayurvedic herbs were the safest method of treatment without side effects, he added. There has been much stalling on the issue with yet another Committee being set up, which will produce their report a few years later. The Department of Health argue that it is European Law, which is holding things up and asked Mr Hughes to investigate the reason for further delays.

David Whitney from the Ayurvedic Trade Association re-iterated Andrew Lansley's pledge for action. He said the THMPD only deals with over the counter herbal medicines and since its introduction no Ayurvedic product has been licensed due to technical and huge financial restraints. Although we can still provide food supplements these too are under threat by the MHRA who could deem them to be medicines and thus also prohibitively expensive to register and for the public to use.

Dr Geoffrey Mead, Vice President of Ayurvedic Practitioners Association, reminded the meeting, that it has been three years since the Secretary of State for Health announced that he was going to go ahead with statutory registration for Ayurveda practitioners. It has now been discovered that the delay is because we are seeking to become 'authorised healthcare professionals' under European legislation and the European authorities have to be consulted.

Dr Palitha Serasinghe, Course Leader of Ayurvedic Medicine at Middlesex University said that without proper statutory regulation someone with no academic qualification may not be able to set up a practice. If we do not regulate, we are putting the public in danger and we want to safeguard the members of the public. He said the College of Ayurveda under Dr Athique and Dr Godagama was set up in 1992. In 2001 they succeeded in setting up a joint training course with Middlesex University. The curriculum was developed in 2004 in consultation with both the Indian and Sri Lankan authorities. Students come to Middlesex University from

many countries including mostly European. However the number of students which had been steadily rising year on year sharply fell with the introduction of the steep rise in tuition fees from £3000 to £9000 a year (which has taken the cost of a 4 year Ayurvedic Medical degree in this country to £36,000).

In 1984 the World Health Organisation brought up a resolution that all participating countries should encourage a regulatory process. The UK government is falling behind and should honour the resolution.

Amarjeet S Bhamra, the organizer of this meeting reminded the audience that at the centre of this debate is the relatively new European Traditional Herbal Medicinal Products Directive (THMPD) 2004/24/EC that came into effect on 30 April 2011. The Directive establishes a regulatory approval process for herbal medicines in the European Union (EU). It requires each EU Member State to set up a traditional herbal registration scheme for manufactured traditional herbal medicines that are suitable for use without medical supervision. Companies are no longer able to sell manufactured unlicensed herbal medicines unless they have an appropriate product licence.

He said that we appear to have come to the point that after: Fourteen years of very hard work, thousands of hours of time, an untold amount of expense, four working parties, their reports (including a House of Lords' Select Committee report), two consultations, a number of specific MHRA proposals concerning relevant medicines law reform, statement by Andrew Lansley the previous Secretary of State for Health to statutory regulate all herbal medical practitioners, a call by the Health Professions Council to move to statutory regulation of this sector as soon as practicable, but the entire British Ayurveda fraternity are still fighting for the survival of the most ancient healthcare system in the world.

Amarjeet believed this is clearly not in the public interests, nor in the interests of the Ayurveda, herbalists, growers, suppliers, manufacturers, shops, students and patient groups who use these traditional medicines. It restricts public right of choice and potentially exposes the public to risks associated with unregulated Internet supply of herbs and unscrupulous practitioners. Many of our patients and public may choose to use herbal medicine as part of their cultural and religious beliefs. If the government fails to act to protect these medicine systems it will be failing to recognise the diversity within our society.

HH Dr Vasanth Vijay was presented with much coveted *Ayurved Ratan* Award and Amarjeet-singh Bhamra was recognized as a *Fellow* by the Ayurvedic Medical Association UK. Rt Hon Simon Hughes MP gave both awards.

Satish Sharma of Save Herbal Medicine Campaign spoke of a case study how a NHS patient made very good recovery when Ayurvedic medicine had been introduced to her and offered vote of thanks to all present at the meeting.

On behalf of Save Herbal Medicine, Amarjeet S Bhamra extends his thanks to the Rt Hon Simon Hughes MP for his attendance at the meeting.