

Explosion of Alternative Information on Drugs

CAP Reports on Drugs and the Third World. *Chloroform—Sale and Hazards: a Malaysian Study*, no 9; *Pizotifen—Double Standards in Marketing*, no 11; *Cyproheptadine—Risks and Unethical Marketing in Malaysia*, no 12; *Stanozolol—Toxicity and Unethical Marketing in Malaysia and the Third World*. Consumers' Association Penang, Malaysia, 1986.

Consolidated List of Products Whose Consumption and/or Sale have been banned, withdrawn or severely restricted or not approved by governments, 11 Issue, UN, 1987.

IN the last couple of years, with the emergence of a vocal and visible consumer movement all over the world, has come about something of an explosion of alternative information in these areas. Until very recently, information about consumer products, etc, was the monopoly of the industry. Even the governments of most third world countries did not have access to data such as the hazardous nature of a drug, its side-effects if any, whether the drug was banned in other countries of the world, etc. This had a direct impact on the drug consumer movement in that the arguments of the drug companies were difficult to counter in the absence of relevant alternative information.

Thus breaking the information monopoly has become one of the prime objectives of the consumer movement, especially the drug consumer movement. Most groups all over the world have been producing volumes of literature which is very useful in showing up the drug industry for its unethical practices. All the publications under review fall into this category and are themselves a reflection of the growing strength of the movement.

The Consumer Association of Penang (CAP) brought out a series of reports in 1986 aimed at providing the public with the results of some of the important areas of CAP's activities.

The first of the series is on chloroform. The study finds that in Malaysia "despite all the documented evidence of its dangers, chloroform is present in many products". Strengths below 10 per cent are exempt from the Malaysian Poison Ordinance 1952 and the Poisons List 1983. Chloroform is a commonly used ingredient in cough preparations. Interestingly, the Drug Index for Malaysia and Singapore lists only three preparations under chloroform containing products. And yet the study has found numerous others in the market. It has also drawn attention to the inadequate information available especially with reference to the hazardous nature of the product, particularly when consumed by children. A review of the advertising of these products in the lay press has also been undertaken. Of the other three booklets, two are on antihistamines and one on an anabolic steroid. All the three were presented to the ministry of health, Malaysia in July 1986. In October the government announced that these three drugs had been banned. Manufacturers and distributors were given three months to withdraw all products containing these drugs.

Although pizotifen, an antihistamine, is classified as a Group C poison, the study group found that it could be easily bought over the counter. The drug used in the treatment of migraine in developed countries is heavily promoted as an appetite stimulant in Malaysia. No contraindications are ever

mentioned. Similar is the case with cyproheptadine, another antihistamine drug. In the US only one preparation of the drug, Periactin is marketed and is indicated for use in allergy conditions and as a supporting drug in anaphylactic reactions. The study finds that the company, Merck, Sharp and Dohme is practising double standards in its marketing of the product in developing countries.

The Consolidated List is in a sense a triumph of the drug consumer movement all over the world. In 1982, because of pressure from these groups, the UN General Assembly "aware of the damages to health and the environment that the continued production and export of products that have been banned and/or permanently withdrawn on grounds of human health and safety. . . is causing in the importing countries" and because many of these countries lack adequate information suggested to the secretary-general that a Consolidated List be prepared of products whose consumption and/or sale have been banned, withdrawn or severely restricted or not approved by governments. The list was to be easily readable, and was to contain both the generic as well as brand names. Needless to say, this sent shock waves through the multinational drug industry. The pressure that was put on the group entrusted with the task to leave out the brand names, is a telling illustration, if one were needed, of the enormous political influence that the industry wields on governments in the developed countries as well as in the third world.

The first issue of the List came out in December 1983 and again was the target of much flak from the industry and vested interests. The Coordinating Committee had to make a sustained campaign to scuttle the industry's move to do a hatchet job on the List, and all such future publications.

The current List is a 655 page volume listing 600 products (100 more than the last one). It is basically in three parts—pharmaceuticals, agrichemicals and industrial chemicals. It records the status of each of these products in all countries (or at least as many as have provided the information). At the end of the volume is a list of brand names of these products.

It must be stressed that this is the first time such information is available in a consolidated manner in one volume. Every effort must be made to keep the initiative from being killed. For one thing, governments either because of the usual bureaucratic problems or because they are under pressure from vested interests, are not very prompt in providing information about changes in legislation regarding particular products. It is here that voluntary groups could play a role.

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