The Supplement Trifecta: Useless, Mislabeled, and Dangerous

By ACSH Staff — June 10, 2009

Vitamin, herbal, and otherwise non-regulated supplements have fared poorly under increasingly public scrutiny. ACSH staffers have long maintained that these and other alternative medicine products are not worth the money. Most of these supplements are the modern equivalents of nineteenth-century snake-oil, says ACSH’s Dr. Ruth Kava.

Now it seems that some quality-control groups such as ConsumerLab.com have taken notice of the products, and they are learning that they don’t necessarily even contain what the label claims. For example, the entire world’s supply of hoodia, the African plant at the center of the latest diet craze, would at most suffice to create 10% of the supplements purported to contain it. I hate to talk about quality control, says ACSH’s Dr. Gilbert Ross, because even if the products did contain what they claim to, they are still useless. What is the recommended daily allowance of hoodia? It’s not a medical supplement.

The same organization also found toxic contaminants in many of the products tested. Harmful metals like lead and mercury, fungal toxins, arsenic, and even dead insects were discovered in the products, which under the Dietary Supplement Health Education Act of 1994 are classified as food products and so are basically unregulated by the FDA. It’s getting out of hand, says Dr. Ross. It’s one thing to market useless placebos, but when dangerous contaminants start showing up, the FDA should get involved.