



RISK NOTE

SUBJECT: Requests for Use of Alternative Products not Dispensed by the Health Care Agency Pharmacy

Clients are using a variety of herbal and homeopathic products, other similar remedies and food supplements (Alternative Products) in an effort to manage a wide range of diseases and disorders including asthma, cancer, rheumatoid arthritis and other inflammatory conditions, irritable-bowel syndrome, anxiety disorders, depression, low back pain, and headaches. While some of the available Alternative Products may offer therapeutic benefits, there are substantial concerns about adverse effects, potential interactions with conventional treatments, variable product quality, and effectiveness.

Alternative Products are not subject to regulation and safety reviews nor are the manufacturers subject to quality reviews. The quantities of the essential ingredients may vary from one lot to another, may be completely absent, or toxic substances may be present which are not listed on the label.

Most health care agencies (HCA) do not encourage the use of Alternative Products while clients are in the care of the HCA. Many clients will continue to use those remedies despite a policy to the contrary. It is probably better to have an open discussion with the client and the family than to simply make rules and assume patient adherence.

A HCA is potentially liable for reasonably foreseeable or predictable drug-related problems. Such problems include lack of effectiveness, worsening of the underlying medical condition, and potential interactions with conventional drug therapies, laboratory tests, diagnostic evaluations, and therapeutic diet.

Clients and their families do not have the right to administer Alternative Products while they are hospitalized. While acknowledging that there are legitimate customer service and public relations concerns, the health system does not have to honour a client or family request to use Alternative Products during hospitalization.

The HCA should have a policy for the administration of Alternative Products which includes that the:

- responsible physician is satisfied that the Alternative Products are appropriate and writes an order for their administration;

- pharmacist reviews the order for compatibility with other prescribed medications and has an opportunity to re-label the Alternative Products or recommend against their administration;
- staff are comfortable with what they are giving;
- client understands the risks and benefits of the Alternative Products and consents to their administration;
- requesting party (other than the client) has the requisite authority to make decisions on behalf of the client.

The challenge is to balance liability concerns, risks to the client, and the responsibility to provide evidence-based health care against the potential benefits of Alternative Products and client autonomy regarding their use (e.g. more flexibility in allowing palliative or terminally ill clients a variety of Alternative Products)

Medical and nursing staffs are encouraged to discuss safety and effectiveness of Alternative Products with clients and to document a thorough history on admission. Clients identified as using Alternative Products must be advised about the HCA policy for their administration and be asked to comply with the policy.

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It should be clearly understood that this document and the information contained within is not legal advice and is provided for guidance from a risk management perspective only. It is not intended as a comprehensive or exhaustive review of the law and readers are advised to seek independent legal advice where appropriate. If you have any questions about the content of this Risk Note please contact your organization's risk manager or chief risk officer to discuss.