

ALL-PARTY PARLIAMENTARY GROUP ON VEGETARIANISM AND VEGANISM



Out of the EU, can the UK now lead on more inclusive medicine development and labelling?

26 April 2021 via Zoom video-conferencing

(Please note this is a paraphrased summary of the speakers' contributions and not a verbatim account.)

Christina Rees MP, Chair of the APPG on Vegetarianism and Veganism opened the meeting and introduced the speakers and Parliamentarians in attendance, Kerry McCarthy MP, Baroness Gale and Baroness Masham.

Sheetal Ladva, Medicines Information Pharmacist and member of Plant Based Health Professionals UK

- Sheetal outlined common animal derived ingredients in medications such as lactose, gelatine, lanolin, and many others that patients are generally unaware of.
- A British Medical Journal 2013 [study](#) found that 74 out of 100 commonly prescribed drugs contain animal derived ingredients.
- It is difficult for both patients and healthcare professionals to know whether or not medications are appropriate for vegetarian or vegan patients because information sheets for medications do not outline whether ingredients are animal-derived or plant-based. Often manufacturers do not know where ingredients are derived from either.
- Sheetal finds this frustrating and said that it can become a difficult task for many professionals to find medications that meet the needs of the patient and also fit within the cost restrictions that providers have.

Dr Hannah Short, GP and specialist in female hormonal health

- Dr Short outlined the difficulties of GPs being able to find suitable medications within the 10-minute appointment time given that manufacturer lists and medication books do not have vegetarian or vegan labelling.
- Finding suitable medications is crucial to the trust that a patient has in their doctor.
- Dr Short gave an example of the Mirena coil, which manufacturers said was vegan. After implanting the coil into a patient, it later became known that the string of the coil contained tallow. Dr Short had to let the patient know when this information came to light.
- Doctors may feel that they are not getting the information that they require for patients, but they also have the duty to do no harm. Not having clear answers for patients may push them to take no action or to use unregulated medications.

Hira Aslam, Pharmacist and founder of *Vegan Chemist* start-up

- Early research conducted by Hira and her team at the *Vegan Chemist* found that 9 out of 10 medications that use gelatine use an animal-derived gelatine instead of a plant-based one.
- 70% of paracetamol available at high street stores is not vegan and often the main reason is beef gelatine used to make the tablet.

- Hira started the *Vegan Chemist* to find a solution to this ongoing problem. Now in the early stages, her team is investigating which common medications are currently vegan and creating a database of these.

Comments from Parliamentarians:

- Christina Rees MP: *I have a vegan GP, so she understands this topic herself, but it must be hard to find vegan medication. Do you have any information on vegan sepsis medications or the COVID-19 vaccines?*
 - Dr Short: Has not done extensive research into sepsis medications or COVID-19 vaccines. However, Dr Short has been explicitly told that the Pfizer vaccine does not contain any animal derived ingredients and it is believed that the Astra-Zeneca vaccine also does not contain any, although the information is not as clear.
 - Hira Aslam: Although there may not be animal ingredients in the final product, there often is animal testing involved in making medications and vaccines.
 - Sheetal Ladva: There is a specialist resource to look at allergens in medications and vaccines that may be useful.
- Baroness Gale: *I imagine most people are not aware that there is animal product in their medication. Is there anything we can do to highlight these issues and put pressure on manufacturers?*
 - Hira Aslam introduced her colleague, Jan Flynn, who would be more confident giving guidance on this.
 - Jan Flynn: Medications are long-tested and it is known how they will work. Changes to any ingredient risk changing the way the active ingredients work. This means when any ingredient changes occur, it changes the makeup of the tablet, requiring MHRA to sign off any changes. It also highlights the economics of going through product testing again and risking even lower profit margins for generic medications, which is already extremely low. This means manufacturers have little motivation to make these changes.
 - Sheetal Ladva: Manufacturers are unlikely to make changes because it is difficult to do and they do not know where their raw ingredients come from. This is why labelling is more important than making new products or changing products.
 - Dr Short: Transparency is really important. Without labelling, patients will not know when their medication is plant or animal derived.
- Baroness Masham: *What could be a safe substitute for paracetamol?*
 - *The Vegan Chemist* is currently setting up a database and it should be launched in the next couple of weeks.
- Kerry McCarthy MP: *Explained how she feels she must choose between her health and medications and her ethical beliefs of veganism. She asked if GPs are resistant to vegan medication or do they need to be encouraged to meet patient needs?*
 - Dr Short: There is some resistance and a lack of education surrounding the topic. Things are improving as more vegan healthcare professionals enter conversations. Often hesitance is because of the short consultation time and not having enough time to find an answer for the patient.
 - Sheetal Ladva: In general hospital food and nutrition must be addressed and it is a bigger issue than just GPs. In general, plant based is becoming more acceptable in the field.

Audience questions/comments:

- Dr Mahendra Patel, a board member of the Royal Pharmaceutical Society: We need to learn more and there are some points to look at for the future. This includes education in pharmacy school; animal derived ingredients vs animals used in process; affordability and accessibility of medication; a sign or symbol for vegetarian or vegan medication; and noting that liquid medications may contain alcohol (therefore unsuitable for certain religious diets).
- Phil Mansbridge: *Question to Hira Aslam about whether the Vegan Chemist is looking to source products or to get pharmaceutical companies to make vegan products.*
 - Hira Aslam: To start by looking at what exists that is vegan and in the long-term showing the pharmaceutical industry that there is a demand to move towards being plant-based.

Future action points:

- VegAPPG to send a letter to the Department of Health on this issue.
- Engage with MHRA and other stakeholders to see whether we can move forward to understand and look at this issue.