

ALL-PARTY PARLIAMENTARY GROUP ON VEGETARIANISM AND VEGANISM



Improving medicine labelling and moving away from animal-derived ingredients

11 July 2023, Portcullis House

Chair: Christina Rees MP

Speakers:

- Evie Sier, vegan patient
- Dr Ishani Rao, Trainee GP, Maidstone and Tunbridge Wells NHS Trust
- Moussa Haddad, Head of Policy and Research, Vegetarian for Life
- Yasmin Aktar, Community Organiser, British Islamic Medical Association (BIMA)
- Paul Fleming, Pharmacist and Technical Director, British Generic Manufacturers Association (BGMA)

Note of the event

The session heard from a range of speakers including clinicians, patients, and professionals working in medicines labelling and development to explore why clear labelling of medical products which use animal derived ingredients is important to the vegan community and beyond and what action could be taken to encourage the use of non-animal derived alternatives wherever possible.

Chair of the Group Christina Rees MP opened the meeting by speaking about her own experience as a sepsis survivor and how she was uncomfortable not knowing which products had been given to her intravenously and what was in them.

Vegetarian for Life's Head of Research and Policy, Moussa Haddad, spoke about the philosophical beliefs of veganism and vegetarianism, explaining how they are more than diets or dietary preferences.

- Increasingly, veganism in particular is being recognised in legal spaces as a coherent belief system that deserves respect and attracts rights and protections.
- We don't get to choose what is an important belief for people.
- He added that we must respect the whole person and their belief system, adding that this issue is non-trivial for people.
- VfL advocates for older vegans and vegetarians who often need medicines. The Special Dietary Network has recently been launched, with a potential for common cause advocacy, because veganism and vegetarianism as philosophical beliefs share many parallels – including legal – with religious beliefs.

Evie Sier, a vegan patient, spoke about her experiences.

- Evie has dilated cardiomyopathy, which requires several drugs to treat which are not vegan.
- She found her doctors to not be particularly helpful in trying to find alternatives and called for more medicines to be vegan.

Yasmin Aktar, Community Engagement lead at the British Islamic Medical Association, said her role is to engage with different stakeholders, and that one of the biggest issues that Muslims face is a lack of trust in the health system.

- She added that a younger generation is starting to question whether their medication suitable for a halal diet, adding that for them it is about purity of body and soul which animal products would contaminate.
- She said that the dignity and respect of people is not being upheld on this issue and called for more training for healthcare providers.

Dr Ishani Rao, a trainee GP, spoke about how this issue is affecting her patients.

- She said that 6% of people identify as vegetarian and 6.5% percent identify as Muslim, but GPs don't have the education or time during short consultations to take into account their patient's beliefs, identify problematic medications, or suggest alternatives.
- She added that this often leads to prescriptions not being taken up, which is a huge problem.
- Patients will sometimes transfer medicines from gelatine capsules to alternative capsules, but this can alter the dose they are taking.
- She also said that trust can be broken by healthcare professionals if patients feel misled. Work is needed to inform healthcare professionals about ingredients in products and encourage alternatives among manufacturers.

Paul Fleming, Technical Director for the British Generic Manufacturers Association, spoke as a representative from the manufacturers of unbranded medicines.

- He said he was a pharmacist by education, and had worked in the pharmaceutical industry and at the medicines regulator, the Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulatory Agency (MHRA).
- He suggested why there has not been more progress before this point by industry, saying that pharmacies will often procure medicines directly themselves whereas medicines in hospitals will be procured centrally, taking into account pricing foremost.
- Medicines information is buried at the moment through the information leaflet, which is accessed too late, when the patient has got the medication already.
- He added a hopeful point that a consortium of groups is working to make electronic patient info a reality in 2–3 years' time. This includes the MHRA, NHS England and the Health Department, as well as 40 pharma companies involved. This could be a potential engagement point for interested groups to feed into.

The Vegan Society Head of Policy, Claire Ogle, agreed to follow up with Paul on engaging with the consortium to encourage more credible information and clear labelling for those avoiding animal products.

When asked about using more vegan-friendly ingredients, Paul said that research and development is needed on new formulations to prove that they will be effective, with clinical trials to determine efficacy.

Claire added that The Vegan Society recognises that it is not always possible or practicable to avoid animal use in a non-vegan world. Sometimes, you may have no alternative to

medication manufactured using animal products. Even if other medications are available, they may be less effective, have more side effects or be unsuitable for healthcare needs. While it can be upsetting to compromise beliefs, The Vegan Society encourages vegans to look after their health and that of others, enabling them to be effective advocates for veganism.