Barking Up the Wrong Tree

The Government Accountability Office needlessly targets dietary supplements.

Guess who's back? The Government Accountability Office (GAO) has emerged to meddle with our health freedom once again. In a new report, the GAO has suggested there may be more adverse event reports (AERs) associated with supplements than previously believed. The GAO also weighed in on the New Dietary Ingredient (NDI) Draft Guidance for supplements, recommending that the FDA establish a time frame for NDI implementation.

AER Shows Supplement Safety

According to the GAO's latest analysis, 6,300 adverse events linked to nutritional supplements were reported to the FDA between 2008 and 2011. The GAO also found that an additional 1,000 AERs were reported to poison control centers and not counted by the FDA. In its report, the GAO recommends that the FDA access poison control AER reports and include them in the overall AER numbers.

Let's do that. If we include the extra 1,000, we have 7,300 adverse events associated with supplements over four years. That amounts to 1,825 supplement AERs per year. Conservatively, 183 million Americans take supplements. Therefore, using the GAO's analysis figures, it appears that every year, about 1 out of every 100,000 people taking a supplement reports an adverse event. If the adverse events reported were not actually caused by supplements in some cases, this miniscule percentage would diminish even further.

Meanwhile, according to the federal government's Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (AHRQ), adverse drug events (ADEs) cause 770,000-plus injuries and deaths each year. This amounts to 1 out of every 400 people experiencing a drug-related adverse event—versus 1 out of every 100,000 supplement users.

GAO Encourages NDI

With this dramatic discrepancy, it seems absurd that the GAO should be spending any of its resources "watching" the nutritional supplement industry! Exacerbating matters, the GAO takes it upon itself to "remind" the FDA to implement NDI regulations, which may triple resources wasted—draining the GAO, the FDA and the entire supplement industry.

Even more puzzling is the fact that the GAO is not a government agency, but an independent group. For its 2013 budget, the GAO requested $526.2 million from Congress. This huge taxpayer expense may be warranted when the GAO investigates critical national issues, such as homeland security, toxic waste, climate change and the economy. And—given the huge numbers that occur—perhaps synthetic drug adverse event reports should be added to the list as well.

But the GAO watchdog is barking up the wrong tree with dietary supplements. By the GAO's own analysis, nutritional supplements are overwhelmingly safe. Plus, the nutritional supplement industry is enjoying a renaissance of innovation that could forever change our nation's health. The GAO, in urging the FDA to implement NDI for supplements, may unwittingly bring this innovation to a screeching halt—and pull thousands of health-enhancing nutritional supplements from store shelves, never to be seen again.

How do you feel about the GAO's apparent attack on nutritional supplements? Where would you prefer this "government watchdog" agency spend its tremendous resources and $526 million budget?

As a taxpayer, you have a voice in government spending! Write to your elected officials today and let them know you do not want the GAO meddling with your health freedom. Send a strong message to the GAO: Hands off the dietary supplement industry! Let your elected officials know where you want the GAO to focus their watchdog efforts.

Fight for your health freedom, and direct your tax dollars where they are needed most! For more information, visit www.nha2013.com. ❖

*This editorial is a public service announcement sponsored by the Nutritional Health Alliance (NHA).