

New bill a bitter pill for athlete

By Rosalind Le Bas Walker

For Allison Roe MBE, winning or losing an international race was never a matter of life or death.

But during the coming months, our golden girl of athletics says New Zealanders are "facing a life or death health choice" with the proposed Therapeutic Products and Medicines Bill.

"If we make this glaring mistake, it will change the course of NZ history for the worse," says Roe, 50, who owes much of her athletic career to the success of complementary therapies. She is appalled at what she says is "lack of government consultation and public awareness" about the affect of the upcoming legislation.

The Bill, which is expected to be voted on in Parliament in the coming months, would set up a new trans-Tasman regulatory regime for medicines, medical devices and complementary health products. Under the legislation, a joint Australian and New Zealand agency would regulate therapeutic products – "creating a national health disaster", according to Roe.

It was chiropractic and nutrient therapies that enabled Roe to enjoy an athletic career, "after I was told by a top surgeon that I had a congenital abnormality of my spine and needed to give up all sport".

Roe is concerned about this issue as a mother who wants to have the best health future for her family of four.

"Natural products must not under any circumstances be regulated under a pharmaceutical model if NZ is to become a world health leader and there is a huge opportunity for NZ to be on top.

"If we want people to be well, if we want a sustainable health system for our children and their children, if we want to see the natural health and our backbone primary produce industries thrive and innovate, we must jump up and down and make a hell of a fuss very quickly."

As an alternative to the upcoming legislation, Roe is advocating an NZ based natural health products regulator.

"Ideally we need a marriage of main-

stream pharmaceuticals and complementary therapies in order to head towards sustainability."

"The big flaw in this Bill," she says, "is that it attempts to apply regulations upon natural products with levels of control applied to pharmaceutical drugs."

However Health Minister Pete Hodgson told the Sunday Star-Times that complementary medicines will not be subject to regulations under a pharmaceutical model.

"The proposed regulatory scheme covers all these products but applies a level of control that is appropriate to the type of products and the risk that may be associated with its use. This means higher risk prescription medicines and devices such as heart-valves will be much more stringently regulated than low risk products such as sticking plasters and vitamin supplements."

But the former head of surveillance at the Australian Therapeutic Goods Administration, Val Johanson, says all products will be subject to pharmaceutical manufacturing standards.

"Many other comparable countries such as the US and Canada do not regulate these products as medicines. Vitamin and mineral supplements are not medicines and not pharmaceuticals. They are natural health products and should be regulated separately in their own right," says Johanson.

Since the Therapeutic Goods Act 1989 was introduced into Australia in 1991, the once flourishing natural health industry has been "virtually killed off", according to Roe, with nearly 200 natural supplements taken off the shelves.

Under the Australian administration, therapeutic goods including all products that are used in connection with preventing, alleviating a disease, ailment, defect or injury must be entered on the Australian Register of Therapeutic Goods before they can be sold to the public.

"This is a huge expense," Roe claims, "and includes innocuous substances such

PHOTO: Brendon O'Hagan



The country's golden girl of athletics, Allison Roe, is swinging into action against the upcoming Therapeutic Products and Medicines Bill.

as green tea extract, comfrey, prune extract, a number of amino acids, zinc picolonate, and Niacin (a B vitamin) in doses that can help reduce the risk of heart attacks, stroke and high cholesterol.

Roe, whose father, Alan Deed, 80, is still a practicing Queensland GP, says since the administration was implemented, Australian doctors have been warned not to refer patients to complementary therapists. She tells of a recent case where an oncologist was struck off for helping his patient procure complementary natural therapies in an effort to save a life.

"What this means is that the pharmaceutical model is starting to wield absolute control with the power being taken out of the hands of people to make health choices, effectively keeping us in a disease care system."

Independent MP Taito Phillip Field last month said he would oppose the government legislation on the Bill. Amongst other issues, Field had concerns about the impact on traditional Maori health practitioners, as does Roe.

"Maori medicine (rongoa) has important intellectual property attached to it and a bright commercial future that will be lost

forever under Australian rule," she says.

The Health Minister says the main aim of the proposed scheme is to safeguard public health and safety.

"NZ's current regulatory framework for therapeutic products is outdated and out of line with international best practice. In addition, NZ's current regulatory capacity is not sustainable even in the short to medium term," Hodgson says.

The Minister also refutes claims about lack of government consultation. "Extensive consultation on the proposals commenced as far back as 2000 and is ongoing."

MORE INFO

■ www.anztpa.org/cm/fs-cm.htm - Australia New Zealand Therapeutic Products Authority's fact sheet on the proposed joint regulatory scheme for complementary medicines.

■ www.nzhealthtrust.co.nz - where you can email all MPs your thoughts on the Bill at the click of a button.