

Adjournment Debate

● (1815)

What is Reye's syndrome? It is becoming more and more well-known to us. It can attack all of us, but generally speaking it attacks children 18 years of age or under. It occurs equally in boys and girls. It usually occurs toward the end of an illness such as the flu or chicken pox. After a brief period of what appears to be recovery, the patient develops certain symptoms. They start to vomit violently, their hands and feet become cold and clammy, they suffer from extreme sleepiness, disorientation and hostility toward those who are looking after them. They are combative. Then they lose consciousness and lapse into a coma. This disease can be fatal or it can leave people with various degrees of learning disability.

I understand that somewhere between 30 and 300 out of every 100,000 children infected with influenza B will be stricken by Reye's syndrome. About 20 per cent to 30 per cent of those do not survive. About 10 per cent to 25 per cent suffer either minor or major disabilities due to brain damage. The disease requires hospitalization and treatment in intensive care, either in a children's hospital or university medical centre. The cause of Reye's syndrome is really unknown, but it has been suspected for the last three years that there is a link with ASA. It seems to me that, given that suspicion, we should not just be sitting calmly and coolly and urging the industry to voluntarily put some sort of warning on their labels, that we should require them to do it. We should require them to refer to the problem with Reye's syndrome.

I hope that tonight the Parliamentary Secretary will tell us that at last the Government is committed to doing just that and will announce that this sort of warning and reference to Reye's syndrome is going to be made compulsory in this country.

Mrs. Gabrielle Bertrand (Parliamentary Secretary to Minister of National Health and Welfare): Mr. Speaker, I must tell you that I understand the concerns of my colleague. I want to assure him that the Department of National Health and Welfare has continuing concern over the safe and wise use of all drugs, including analgesics or pain-killers.

The Department has consulted widely with members of the health professions and the pharmaceutical industry in order to bring about changes to the way that analgesics are presented to the public, including changes to labelling and advertising. Most of the improvements result from the recommendations of a non-governmental expert advisory committee established by the Department. These changes are being introduced so that consumers can make more informed decisions about how and when to use analgesics.

[*Translation*]

For security and efficiency reasons, a number of analgesic products can no longer be sold without a physician's prescription. They have to be prescribed by a physician. The concentration of analgesic drugs sold over the counter has been standardized at 325 milligrams per tablet to enable consumers

to compare products more easily and avoid taking overdoses or underdoses.

Advertising concerning nonstandardized drugs is now subject to stricter regulations.

The provinces have been urged to ban the sale of large-size or nonstandard concentration analgesic tablets outside drugstores so that the consumer may consult a health specialist before buying large quantities of such products.

The labels of drugs containing acetylsalicylic acid must warn the consumer to consult a physician if the product is to be used during more than five days. These drugs sold without prescription are intended only to relieve temporary symptoms. All salicylate-based adult products must bear a label urging breast-feeding women or women in their last three months of pregnancy to consult a physician before use so as not to endanger the health of the fetus or newborn child.

The Department of National Health and Welfare is concerned about the security of our children, just as we all are. That is why bottles of analgesics for children which are sold over the counter cannot contain more than 24 tablets. Under recently implemented regulations, analgesics for children are sold in containers which children cannot open. Moreover, the pharmacist who sells salicylate-based products for adults must offer them to the public in containers which children cannot open.

The Department is aware of the possible link which may exist between the use of acetylsalicylic acid, also called ASA, and the development among children and teenagers of a rare and serious illness, often fatal, called Reye's syndrome. In October 1983, as a warning to the parents, we sent to all Canadian households, together with the family allowance cheque, a guide to the treatment of fever. Methods other than medicine were suggested to treat fever among children, and the possible link between the use of ASA and the subsequent development of Reye's syndrome was emphasized.

This guide was published again in 1985 for distribution among consumers. The Department and the manufacturers of over-the-counter pharmaceutical products in Canada have studied together the issue of warnings printed on salicylates' labels. These changes of course compelled manufacturers to change their products' labels and packages.

● (1820)

[*English*]

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Attewell): I wonder if I could ask the Parliamentary Secretary to summarize.

Mrs. Bertrand: Yes, Mr. Speaker. I just want to say that the Minister of National Health and Welfare (Mr. Epp) recently stated that the Government will certainly consider the mandatory labelling of products should the industry fail to comply with its voluntary program.