

# Forum

## Facing the facts of ephedra

**P**eter Ferrara, in his Oct. 22 Commentary article, "Not a fat chance," criticizes the State of California for banning dietary supplements containing ephedrine. He calls this important public health legislation an "unnecessary regulatory burden on Californians."

Mr. Ferrara seems to suggest that because ephedra is naturally derived and has been used in China for thousands of years, it must be safe. This is a common mischaracterization employed by the dietary supplement industry. Many naturally derived substances can be quite dangerous, including opiates, heavy metals and plants such as deadly nightshade and poisonous mushrooms. And ephedra's use in traditional Chinese medicine, steeped in tea and taken for a short while as a bronchi-dilator, is very different from putting it in a pill with other stimulants, and marketing it for long-term use.

While it is true that ephedrine is used in over-the-counter drugs, it is also true the ephedrine/caffeine combinations sold as dietary supplements have been prohibited in over-the-counter drugs for 20 years. Many of the nation's largest drug store and discount store chains — Walgreens, CVS, Eckerd, Rite Aid, and Wal-Mart, collectively representing more than 17,300 stores nationwide — have pulled all ephedra-containing dietary supplements from their shelves.

GNC, the largest specialty retailer of nutritional supplements in the country, with 5,300 stores nationwide, removed ephedra from its shelves in June. Perhaps most telling of all, dietary supplement manufacturers themselves now are marketing "ephedra-free" alternatives.

Far from being an overreaction or unnecessary burden, this legislation is an important step in protecting consumers from an unsafe product. In past few years, 117 deaths and more than 18,000 other health-related incidents such as heart attack, strokes and seizures have been linked to ephedra. Orioles pitcher Steve Bechler is just the latest of many healthy young adults who have died or suffered serious injuries associated with these supplements.

To date, more than 21 states have passed restrictions on supplements containing ephedra that are more stringent than federal regulations. Illinois and New York passed statewide bans of ephedra earlier this year. California is simply the latest in a long line of governmental entities that were forced to act because the Food and Drug Administration has failed to.

Mr. Ferrara has decided to call this action "big government liberalism." This is name-calling, not argument. The evidence that dietary supplements containing ephedra do pose risks and the lack of evidence that these products produce any long-term health

benefit is sufficient for FDA to meet even the very high standard set forth by the Dietary Supplement Health and Education Act necessary to pull an unsafe dietary supplement off of the market.

Banning ephedra is a simple action, supported by leading physicians, athletic groups and health organizations, including the American Medical Association and American Heart Association, the National Football League, the NCAA and the International Olympic Committee. FDA should follow California's example.

### DICK DURBIN HENRY WAXMAN

Sen. Dick Durbin, Illinois Democrat, is assistant Senate Democratic floor leader and the ranking Democrat on the Senate Subcommittee on Oversight of Government. Rep. Henry Waxman of California is the ranking Democrat on the House Government Reform Committee.

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