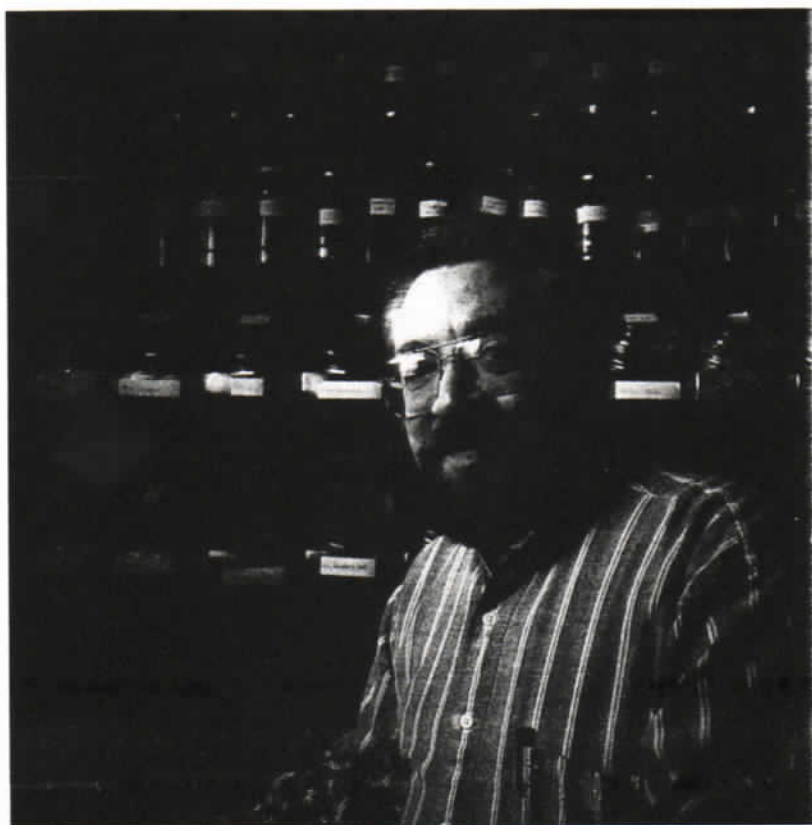


CURBING THE  
HERBALISTS

Baltimore

By KURT KLEINER



**For purveyors of alternative medicines, this could be the year when the feds move in.**

which herbal supplements are little more than snake oil?

THE FOOD AND DRUG ADMINISTRATION's proposed rules would only allow health claims for supplements when there is "general scientific agreement" that they actually work. And some consumer groups believe the regulations are necessary to govern a renegade industry. "Approximately 20 percent of the products we've encountered make unsubstantiated health claims," says John Gleason, attorney for the Center for Science in the Public Interest. He rustles through a bag of supplements—The Potent One for Men, Memory Booster, Ultra Hair—unproven products he believes exploit consumers. "It's about the profit motive," Gleason says.

Yet even some regulation advocates think supplements can be helpful. Take Johns Hopkins' Dr. Benjamin Caballero, a noted nutritionist who has advised federal regulators on supplements. He agrees, for instance, that studies show vitamin E might play a role in fighting cancer. But those results come from people who get a lot of vitamin E from foods. Until clinical tests show the same results solely from taking supplements, he believes, vitamin E manufacturers should be banned from making the cancer-fighting claims.

**B**altimore's alternative health care community suspects the federal medical establishment is up to no good. If the FDA has its way in the coming months, they fear, herbal medicines may go the way of the Dodo bird.

*Save the beleaguered guarana root!*

Area herbal advocates like Zoh Hieronimus, one of Baltimore's reigning gurus of the alternative, thinks natural remedies like ginseng and garlic can cure sickness and even save lives. But the feds aren't convinced, and they're out to muzzle the profusion of allegedly illegitimate claims in this \$3 billion annual industry.

*Stamp out the radical fringe!*

"We're fighting against the economic structure," says Hieronimus, founder of Baltimore's Ruscombe Mansion, a center for alternative health care providers. Hieronimus founded the Mansion

after "the best treatment Johns Hopkins had to offer" failed to relieve her ileitis. Now she keeps the condition at bay with herbal teas like chamomile and slippery elm. She's also an advocate of everything from yoga to chromotherapy to medical astrology—and a good local example of how far apart the worlds of standard and alternative medicine stand.

*Alternative pharmacist Levitt thinks the feds are going too far.*

She's got lots of company. An untold number of Baltimoreans buy up to \$200 million annually in vitamins and herbal supplements, according to Kelvin Levitt, owner of Pikesville's Health Department, a natural remedies store. "I think the whole thing is terrible," he says of the FDA initiative. "I just don't think it's right to not give people a choice in how to administer their own health care."

But wait. What's so bad about regulating health care claims? How else is the unwary buyer to know