

## International Alliance for Kava

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As in the US, an international alliance is being established around the world to protect kava as a traditional drink in the Pacific and herbal medicine in the Western World. 80 international specialists and local growers of pacific herbs in Vanuatu gathered on February 18-20, 2002 and kava was a main topic. This conference was organized by the Commonwealth, Pacific Herbs Business Forum. At the end of the conference, the participants agreed on a statement, which requests that the governments of the kava exporting countries take steps to implement actions for the recovery and development of the agricultural sector. This is important for the economies and farmers in kava exporting countries.

They also conclude, that kava has been consumed for many hundreds of years in amounts that greatly exceed the dosage in herbal medicines. No pattern of liver disease had been linked over all these centenaries to kava consumption. The forum asks the European health authorities to examine the current actions against kava products. They also ask the WHO to convene an expert panel to examine the scientific evidence concerning the alleged adverse effects of kava.

Furthermore, these requests were presented to a meeting of Forum Economic Ministers, held in Sydney, February 27-28, 2002 as well as to the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting (CHOGM) in Brisbane afterwards.

The situation in Germany will not lead to a ban of kava, or a withdrawal of all products, as has happened in countries such as Great Britain, France, Austria and Ireland, even though Germany started the whole hysteria. Kava in Germany is regulated as a drug and in about 80 % of all usages it is prescribed by physicians and reimbursed by the health insurance system for anxiety treatment. The plan of the pharmacovigilance unit of the health authorities in Germany is to recommend to the government that kava becomes a prescription only medicine. For the present market, this would not result in a major change, since most patients usually get kava from their doctors already.

But the decision to make kava a prescription only product has not been finalized and the industry and the associations as well as academia are fighting to keep kava an OTC product, because the available data does not justify a change in the present situation.

In a recent article in the leading journal for pharmacists DAZ (Deutsche Apotheker Zeitung), Professor Dieter Loew, a well respected pharmacologist concludes that the present judgment on kava was not justifiable or understandable. The positive effects of kava are very well clinically documented and the risks are low, known, and can be calculated.

In a second article by Dr. Matthias Schmidt and Professor Adolf Narstedt from the University of Muenster, the individual cases presented by the German health authorities are practically ripped apart. They quote the extreme example of the patient who died of liver failure. In this case it was documented, that the patient had an alcohol abuse problem lasting many years and the liver was damaged for a long time before the patient started to take kava.

The analysis of the individual 36 cases revealed that only one case has a probability of a causal relation to kava in the proposed dosage. All other 35 cases had no relation to kava. There is a causal relation to other medications or the relation cannot be properly evaluated. The authors also conclude that a possible ban of kava would lead to an extreme increase in the danger of liver toxicity, since the patients must be treated with other chemical drugs, which have liver toxicity risk 112 – 265 times as high as that for kava.

The great interest of consumers in natural therapies and herbal medicines has grown this category to a dimension which is relevant in market terms. US \$ billion 20 turnover for herbal medicines internationally is a good reason for some interest groups or multinational players to start active PR campaigns to discredit that market segment.