

MEDIA RELEASE

Animals Asia calls for action as pathologists warn of contaminants in bear bile

Contaminated bear bile could be harming consumers of traditional Chinese medicine, Animals Asia Foundation has warned after two senior pathologists raised serious concerns about its safety.

Animals Asia's China Relations Director Christie Yang said she had decided to go public in the wake of the contaminated milk powder scandal that has left four infants dead and more than 13,000 ill. Ms Yang said experts had compelling health concerns about the bile taken from farmed bears as it was riddled with impurities, including faeces, urine, blood and pus.

She said Asiatic black bears (or moon bears) held in captivity rarely contract liver tumours unless they are very old, but almost half of the rescued bears that have died were euthanised because of liver cancer.



Farmed moon bears are developing liver tumours at an alarming rate.

Animals Asia Founder and CEO Jill Robinson said the authorities should be asking what the bile taken from such sick bears was doing to the health of humans who consumed it. "A healthy bear's bile is as fluid as water and ranges in colour from bright yellowy-orange to green. Our vets have described bile leaking from the gall bladders of our rescued bears as 'black sludge'."



Bile from diseased farm bears is described as "black sludge".

The prized ingredient in bear bile, ursodeoxycholic acid (UDCA), is used by TCM practitioners for a myriad of complaints, including liver problems. However, UDCA can be synthesised easily under laboratory conditions – the UDCA produced is pure, clean and reliable. There are also more than 50 herbal alternatives.

“For two years now, we have been telling the authorities of our concerns, but still nothing is being done. Here we have a very similar scenario to the milk powder scandal; people who take bear bile as a traditional medicine cure have a right to know just what it is that they are consuming,” Ms Robinson said.



Eye-drops containing bear bile are readily available in China.

Dr Wang Sheng Xian, a Chengdu pathologist, who is analysing the livers of bears that have died from liver cancer said: “I personally think we are better to use alternative drugs and never extract bile from bears ... this kind of drug could be harmful to people. As we can see, the bile causes very sick bears – can we use this kind of bile for medicine for humans, especially as it is baked at a low temperature?” Dr Wang said.

Dr Dang van Duong, Chief Pathologist at the Bach Mai Hospital in Hanoi, Vietnam said he was shocked by the condition of the bears rescued by Animals Asia and urged consumers to think twice before taking the bile from such diseased animals. He made the comments after conducting histo-pathological examinations of the specimens from three rescued farmed bears that recently had their gall bladders removed. He found a substantial thickening of the wall of the gall bladder, a consequence of the bile extraction process.

Bears on farms in China are subjected to the free-dripping method of bile extraction on a daily basis. A permanent hole is cut into the bear’s abdomen through to its gall bladder. To extract the bile, the farmer pokes a tube into the hole and lets the bile drip out. Some farms still use permanently implanted catheters to drain the bile – a method that is now against China’s regulations.



Pathologists fear bile taken from such diseased bears may be harming humans who consume it.

Animals Asia Foundation has relayed its concerns about the safety of bear bile to the Chinese authorities as well as the Hong Kong Secretary for Food and Health, Dr York Chow, and the World Health Organisation.

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