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ONE HUNDRED EIGHTH CONGRESS

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Congress of the United States

House of Representatives

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February 21, 2003

Mr. David J. Stern
Commissioner
National Basketball Association
656 Fifth Avenue
New York, NY 10022

Dear Mr. Stern:

Recent press attention has focused on the tragic death of Baltimore Orioles pitcher Steve Bechler. According to the Broward County Medical Examiner, Joshua Perper, the dietary supplement ephedra may have contributed to Mr. Bechler's death.¹ Earlier reports have connected this popular over-the-counter product to the deaths of several other star athletes,² and I have written previously to Major League Baseball, the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) and the National Football League (NFL) about their policies on ephedra.³ As you may know, the NCAA and the NFL, as well as the International Olympic Committee, now ban the use of ephedra by athletes. I am writing to ask why the National Basketball Association has not also acted to protect its players by prohibiting the use of ephedra-containing dietary supplements.

For several years, medical experts have expressed serious concerns about the safety of ephedrine, a component of ephedra products. Reports in the medical literature have linked ephedrine to lethal cardiac arrhythmias⁴ and stroke.⁵ Leading experts also believe that ephedrine

¹*Bechler's Diet Pills Draw Scrutiny*, Washington Post (Feb. 19, 2003).

²*Player Adds to Wheeler Details*, Los Angeles Times (Aug. 13, 2001); *Supplement Use Hinted in Death*, CNN.com (Aug. 13, 2001).

³Letter from Rep. Henry A. Waxman to Allan H. (Bud) Selig, Commissioner, Major League Baseball (Feb. 19, 2003); Letter from Rep. Henry A. Waxman to Paul Tagliabue, Commissioner, National Football League (Aug. 22, 2001); Letter from Rep. Henry A. Waxman to Bob Lawless, Chair, Executive Committee, National Collegiate Athletic Association (Aug. 22, 2001).

⁴Christine Haller and Neal Benowitz, *Adverse Cardiovascular and Central Nervous System Events Associated with Dietary Supplements Containing Ephedra Alkaloids*, New

can cause heatstroke by stimulating the body's production of heat while constricting the capillaries, making it more difficult for an over-heated body to cool itself.⁶ It appears that this deadly combination may have cost Mr. Bechler his life.

The Food and Drug Administration has received over 1,400 adverse event reports for supplements containing ephedrine alkaloids. These reports raise further health concerns. They include at least 81 reports of death, 27 reports of heart attack, and 65 reports of stroke. Data from the American Association of Poison Control Centers that was analyzed by FDA also contain hundreds of reports of adverse events associated with dietary supplements containing ephedrine alkaloids. The majority of the adverse events in the poison control data involve people under 40. About one-third of the events involve people under the age of 19.

Three recent reports and studies are especially disturbing. In October 2002, an investigative report released by Senator Richard J. Durbin, Rep. Susan Davis and myself revealed that Metabolife, a major manufacturer of dietary supplements, had knowledge of nearly 2,000 reports of significant adverse events related to ephedra products. These adverse event reports included three deaths, 20 heart attacks, 24 strokes, 40 seizures, 465 episodes of chest pain, and 966 reports of heart rhythm disturbances.⁷ In January of this year, researchers reported a threefold increase in the risk of stroke among people taking more than 32 milligrams of ephedra per day.⁸ And a study released in advance of a planned March 18 publication in the *Annals of Internal Medicine* found that products containing ephedra are responsible for 64% of

England Journal of Medicine, 1833–8 (Dec. 21, 2000).

⁵*Id.*

⁶J. Bailes, R. Cantu, and A. Day, *The Neurosurgeon in Sport: Awareness of the Risks of Heatstroke and Dietary Supplements*, *Neurosurgery*, 283–6 (August 2002). According to Dr. Ray Woosley, Vice President for Health Sciences and Dean of the College of Medicine at the University of Arizona, and Dr. Neal Benowitz, Professor of Medicine, Psychiatry, and Biopharmaceutical Sciences and Chief of the Division of Clinical Pharmacology and Toxicology, University of California, ephedrine can contribute to heatstroke in at least two ways. First, it can augment the effects of adrenaline on blood pressure and heart rate, thereby increasing the workload of the heart. Second, it can constrict the capillaries and inhibit the normal release of heat.

⁷Minority Staff, Committee on Government Reform, *Adverse Event Reports from Metabolife* (October 2002).

⁸L.B. Morgenstern et al., *Use of Ephedra-Containing products and Risk for Hemorrhagic Stroke*, *Neurology*, 132–135 (January 2003).

Mr. David J. Stern
February 21, 2003
Page 3


all reported adverse reactions to herbs in the United States.⁹ Yet these products represent less than one percent of all herbal sales.

Despite this voluminous evidence pointing to the dangers of ephedra-containing dietary supplements, their use is still permitted in the National Basketball Association. I would like to know why this serious safety issue has not been addressed. Please provide me with answers to the following questions:

1. Are you aware of any adverse events among professional basketball players that may be associated with dietary supplement use? If so, please describe the events and the supplements involved.
2. What kind of surveillance do you conduct to identify adverse events relating to dietary supplement use?
3. Is it your policy to report adverse events associated with dietary supplement use to the FDA or to require team doctors to report these events? If so, how many have you reported? If not, why not?
4. What steps have you taken to educate athletes and coaches about the potential dangers of certain supplements?
5. What decisions has the National Basketball Association made about ephedra-containing dietary supplements?
6. Will the National Basketball Association change its policy soon?

Please provide the requested information by March 3, 2003. If you have any questions, call Sarah Despres of my staff at (202) 225-5420.

Sincerely,



Henry A. Waxman
Ranking Minority Member

⁹Stephen Bent, Thomas N. Tiedt, Michelle C. Odden, and Michael G. Shlipak, *The Relative Safety of Ephedra Compared with Other Herbal Products*, *Annals of Internal Medicine* (Mar. 18, 2003) (available online at: <http://www.acponline.org/journals/annals/ephedra.htm>).