

Israel Moves to Ban Ritalin

Health Minister Roni Milo supports putting stringent restrictions on use of the drug Ritalin, often prescribed for hyperactive children, a Health Ministry spokeswoman told Ha'aretz yesterday.

The question arose after MK Eli Ben-Menachem (One Israel) submitted a bill that would severely limit the administration of dangerous drugs, amphetamines or tranquilizers to children under 18 years. The bill would forbid doctors to prescribe Ritalin without permission from either the Health Ministry's district psychiatrist, its regional chief physician or the health minister.

Ben-Menachem claims that Milo supports the bill. However, it has aroused vehement objections from the Health Ministry, physicians and educators.

The bill has passed its preliminary reading in the Knesset and will now be discussed by a special Knesset committee. The committee will hold its first hearing in two weeks.

There has been an ongoing battle over the use of Ritalin in both Israel and the United States for several years. In 1998, a special Health Ministry task force submitted a report on Ritalin to then health minister Yehoshua Matza. The report included a number of recommendations, including the establishment of special committees to prescribe the drug.

Each committee was to include a psychologist, social worker and educator as well as doctors. These committees were also to monitor the child's progress. However, none of the report's recommendations were ever implemented.

Ben-Menachem's bill was largely prepared by Citizens for Human Rights," which considers administering drugs to children a "crime against humanity." The group also considers psychiatric diagnoses such as dyslexia or hyperactivity to be "crimes against humanity.