



1. This material has been adapted from Xuanhao Chan, L. B. (2008). Safe internet buying of medicines: why and how pharmacists should help. *European Journal of Hospital Pharmacy*, 14 (3), 61-63

The Internet and counterfeit medical products¹

There is a growing trend with more and more people buying medical products online. In over 50% of cases, medicines purchased over the Internet from illegal sites that conceal their physical address have been found to be counterfeit.

Health professionals communicate the risks and dangers of buying medical products on the Internet

This is a role that health professionals can play in their daily interactions with patients. It is important to identify the needs and concerns of patients in paying for their medicines and in obtaining a regular supply of affordable and quality medicine in their communities. Sufficient patient counselling about the proper channels when buying medicines should always be done to avoid misconceptions of the risks of buying medicines from the Internet.

Understand the patient's motivation

Every patient might have a reason to be tempted to go online to buy their medicines. It could be related to:

- **Reducing** out of pocket payments. This is particularly true in countries where social insurance coverage is weak or insufficient and where medicines prices are relatively higher. For those patients who have to pay, most if not all medicines out of their pocket, buying from the Internet could be seen as a way of reducing their treatment costs.
- **Accessing** drugs without prescription. It is often the availability of a prescription-only medicine without a prescription and not the price of the product which is important to the patient. This may perpetuate incidents of drug abuse or misuse.
- **Being** anonymous. The physiological unwillingness to discuss "embarrassing" lifestyle issues, such as erectile dysfunction and depression. However, little is also known about confidentiality of patient information when using illegal Internet drug outlets.
- **Increasing** the range of possible treatments. Access to products or medicines that are not yet authorized in their country.
- **Increasing** access to medicines. The geographical limitation to the patient's access to a brick and mortar pharmacy. This is especially evident in rural areas where the density of pharmacy serving the community is rather low, and consequently if the pharmacy is far from the house of patients.

Explain and give examples of potential dangers to patients

The message needs to be, "Do not take the risk of buying your medicines from unknown sources, such as the Internet. If you must buy from the Internet, ensure that the website is that of a pharmacy you know and trust."

The advent of much more educated and more informed consumers are challenging the health professionals in providing accurate information and acceptable prices for the medicines that they need, even though in some cases, these consumers may be obtaining their information from unreliable sources. Health professionals are in a position to educate patients on the reliable sources of online medical information.

Provide patients with tools and information

If patients insist on buying their medicines from the Internet, health professionals can educate them to check for the following information from the e-pharmacy website:

- Name of the pharmacy providing the service.
- The geographic addresses at which the pharmacy is established and its details (telephone and fax numbers) including e-mail address which allow it to be contacted rapidly and communicated with in a direct and effective manner.
- Professional title of the pharmacist responsible and country where it has been granted.
- Professional body with which the pharmacist responsible is registered and the relevant supervisory authority (where applicable).
- Reference to the applicable professional rules in the country of establishment and the means to access them (a link to, or the geographic address of the body in their possession).



www.whpa.org/counterfeit_campaign.htm