

Online pharmacies: buyer beware

Bill Kelly

Executive director
Australian Friendly Societies
Pharmacies Association
Canberra

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Online pharmacies have been operating in Australia since the mid 1990s. Community pharmacy is now a mix of traditional pharmacies with little or no online presence, pharmacies that dispense through multiple channels but where physical presence remains the dominant characteristic (substantial number), and pharmacies that are only online. The internet gives access to overseas-based online pharmacies thus allowing a comparison of Australian sites to those overseas.

An Australian pharmacy business must address a number of regulatory and licensing requirements of the jurisdiction and of operational best practice. A prescription is needed for Schedule 4 and Schedule 8 medicines and the importation of controlled substances or products is prohibited.¹ The risks to consumers from online pharmacies not complying with these regulations include:

- fake or adulterated products with little therapeutic activity or unknown safety and efficacy
- inappropriate supply of narcotics and other controlled substances
- lack of supervision by a doctor or pharmacist
- lack of appropriate drug information
- failure in supply-chain protocols which may affect the quality of a medicine, e.g. lack of appropriately stored or expired medicines
- unlicensed premises and staff.

Fake or rogue online pharmacies represent a danger to consumer health. In 2014, the US Government Accountability Office estimated that there were

36 000 rogue internet pharmacies. These pharmacies generally supply drugs without a prescription and may or may not employ pharmacists. They are rarely licensed in the jurisdiction where they are located. To all intents and purposes they are not pharmacies and may not even have a shopfront.²

A recent UK study of 113 online pharmacies selling diazepam, fluoxetine and simvastatin found that fewer than 25% were regulated and 80 were willing to sell prescription medicines without a prescription.³ The unregulated sites were more likely to provide safety information (cautions, adverse effects, drug interactions) suggesting that inclusion of some clinical knowledge should not serve as a guarantee of the seller's provenance. However, the unregulated sites were significantly less likely to provide the contact details of the pharmacy.³

Price tends to dominate the business model of online pharmacies with a focus on the mechanistic, technological and logistical aspects of supply. Most public discussion around online supply in the USA and Europe centres on price, market segmentation and domination, and economies of scale, rather than on the quality use of medicines.⁴

Anecdotally, both the USA and Australian experiences suggest that online pharmacies are able to offer cheaper medicines. In Australia, this does not include medicines that meet or exceed the consumer copayment as they are subsidised. Some consumers prefer the convenience of mail order, particularly in the rural and remote setting.

All studies and warnings from regulatory agencies emphasise the caution 'buyer beware'. As the UK Medicines and Healthcare Products Agency advises, 'Buying medicines online is a risk, many websites operate outside the legal requirements and you have no idea what you are getting and how it will affect you. You are gambling with your health.'⁵

Overseas online pharmacies appear to not offer the same level of personal contact that is required of Australian pharmacies, whether by standards or guidelines.⁶ An inspection of six online pharmacies verified by the US National Association of Boards of Pharmacy found no evidence for how consumers could contact the pharmacy for advice about medicines. The Australian situation is markedly different. The Pharmacy Board of Australia emphasises the quality use of medicines and states that:

The Board views the indirect supply of medicines, such as internet and mail-order

From the Editor



The treatment of hepatitis C is undergoing rapid change, thanks to the new regimens reviewed by Alex Thompson and Jacinta Holmes. While people may be tempted to order the new drugs from overseas, Bill Kelly urges caution with online ordering.

As hepatitis C can be sexually transmitted, it is also discussed by Catriona Ooi and David Lewis in their article on managing sexually transmitted infections.

Hepatitis C is also associated with injecting drugs such as opioids. There are controls on prescribing these drugs and Walid Jammal and Grace Gown warn about the medicolegal pitfalls for not following the regulations on opioid prescribing.

The supply of medicinal cannabis will also be tightly controlled. Bridin Murnion comments on the potential clinical applications of cannabis.

As cannabis causes cognitive impairment it is unlikely to be useful in patients with dementia. David Kitching tells us what can be used to treat depression in dementia.

dispensing, as less than the optimal way of delivering a pharmacy service because communication may be compromised. The Board recognises, however, that there are circumstances where these forms of communication are necessary in, or appropriate to, the patient's circumstances (e.g. in remote areas).

A pharmacist supplying medicines indirectly to a patient must comply with all relevant State or Territory, and Commonwealth legislation, the Pharmacy Board of Australia's *Guidelines for Dispensing of Medicines*, and established practice and quality assurance standards.⁷

The Australian Therapeutic Goods Administration (TGA) also publishes a warning regarding the potential dangers of online pharmacies (usually overseas) but does not conduct any regulatory review of internet sites.⁸ The TGA's position assists consumers in having greater confidence in Australian online pharmacy sites rather than those overseas.

Online ordering of medicines by consumers will remain a feature of the Australian pharmacy landscape, and high operational and professional requirements should ensure that medicines ordered from Australian registered online pharmacies meet Australian standards. Conversely, non-Australian sites offer little in the way of reassurance.

Australian health consumers should be vigilant of online pharmacies and standards and guidelines of the Pharmacy Board of Australia, the Pharmaceutical Society of Australia, and the accreditation requirements of the Quality Care Pharmacy Program need to be maintained. There should be appropriate governance of access to medicines, whether that be through a traditional walk-in pharmacy or via an online transaction. ◀

Bill Kelly is a practitioner member of the Pharmacy Board of Australia and is the executive director of the Australian Friendly Societies Pharmacies Association.

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Online pharmacies: a consumer perspective

While the power of the internet has proved a terrific boon for consumers seeking bargains and otherwise inaccessible products, pharmacy is one online sector where the benefits are mixed. The uninitiated consumer can encounter both health and financial hazards.

From a consumer's point of view, online pharmacies seem to offer much potential value, although not necessarily on price. For housebound patients, the option of ordering medication from home and having it delivered to the door is obvious. For those living in remote areas, and consumers who are short of time and for whom reaching the pharmacy is difficult, ordering online has obvious advantages. There are also those seeking personal products who prefer anonymity.

The rewards and risks of online pharmacy shopping present a significant issue for consumer health. Two national regulatory authorities have issued detailed warnings about online pharmacies, but stopping overseas online pharmacy scams is no simple task.

The Australian Competition and Consumer Commission states there are legitimate online pharmacies that list full contact details and require valid prescriptions. However, it warns there are scams and spam emails offering medicines at very cheap prices, or without the need for prescriptions, that can cause financial and health problems.

Questions surrounding international sites selling sildenafil and other products without prescription,

Leanne Wells

Chief executive officer
Consumers Health Forum of
Australia

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