

INTERNET PHARMACY

Not in the best interest of Canadians

The Internet may be a great tool for consumers who want to buy CDs and books. But medicines are different, because professional advice is necessary to ensure that they are used properly. There is particular concern around international sales which undermine safety protocols on both sides of the border.

Canadian provincial regulatory colleges have warned pharmacists and doctors that many practices associated with Internet pharmacy are unethical and that practitioners can be guilty of professional misconduct.

The Internet provides no substitute for accountable, personal contact with a health care professional. By meeting separately and in person with both a pharmacist and a physician, the patient receives valuable information in relation to how to take the medication, how to optimize the therapy and minimize the potential for side effects and/or interactions with food or other drugs. In many cases, a pharmacist will phone the prescribing doctor to discuss the choice of medicines. The ability of a pharmacist to work co-operatively with the doctor is lessened in cases where they do not live and work in the same community.

A majority of Manitoba pharmacists voted against a proposal that would have legitimized Internet pharmacy business practices. Most pharmacists understand that Internet sales marginalize the service that they pride themselves on providing their patients. Jeff Poston, Executive Director of the Canadian Pharmacists Association, had this to say: "We believe that face-to-face communication between patients and pharmacists builds a relationship that is critical to the optimal management of drug therapy, and the CPhA opposes international prescriptions services where the patient does not have a relationship with the pharmacist or the prescriber because patient care may be compromised."

Canadian regulatory colleges forbid many of the activities around Internet pharmacies, including the act of writing a prescription for a patient that the doctor has never seen. The Canadian Medical Association (CMA) "strongly opposes the participation of physicians in this activity."

"It is simply not acceptable for a physician to sign a prescription without first properly assessing the patient," said former CMA President Dr. Dana Hanson.

Regulation of health care professionals depends on public accountability, through the professional colleges that work in concert with provincial and federal governmental agencies. In cross-border sales, accountability lines and liabilities are unclear. So the system to protect the public is undermined.

The Canadian government has signed international agreements that govern free trade across borders. But Canada has also built a health care system that is distinct from that of the United States and other countries. That is why health care exemptions have been built into those agreements. Citizens in every country have a right to know that their medicines have been approved by their own government for use following local practices and protocols. As well, one cannot assume that versions of medicines sold in different countries are exactly the same. Many use different formulations, strengths and even names in other countries.

Cross-border sales also threaten Canada's supply of medicines and the availability of pharmacists to serve Canadians. The expectation that the Canadian distribution chain can suddenly serve a population that is ten times larger will inevitably lead to shortages here in Canada. As well, the attraction of Internet pharmacies is worsening a longstanding shortage of pharmacists. A November 2003 survey of non-Internet pharmacies in Manitoba (the province with the largest volume of cross-border sales) found 83 per cent of respondents reported that more prescription drugs were in short supply and 66 per cent were having a harder time finding sufficient pharmacists to care for their patients.

Internet pharmacy also threatens Canada's efforts to be seen around the world as a leading jurisdiction for health sciences research and development. The notoriety of Internet pharmacies can position a place as the home of low-cost services. Provinces that are serious about attracting global investments would rather draw attention to the quality of science being practiced by their businesses and universities. In fact, there are international fears that cross-border sales will make Canada a haven for drug counterfeiters. The Deputy Commissioner of the FDA has said, "Canada could become a transshipment point of legitimate and non-legitimate manufacturing concerns throughout the world and in many cases we would not be able to determine the true country of origin." This simply is not consistent with the vision of a knowledge-based, value-added economy creating good jobs.

No matter how you look at, whether your priority is creating a high tech economy, enhancing patient safety or building a reliable health care system, Internet pharmacy is clearly not working in the best interests of Canadians.

AstraZeneca's Position

Our company supports the work of professional colleges across Canada that regulate doctors and pharmacists which are actively opposing the work of Internet pharmacies. It is clear that patients benefit from face-to-face discussions with both a doctor and a pharmacist, to ensure that medicines are used properly. As well, AstraZeneca Canada Inc. believes it is irresponsible for businesses to sell medicines outside the jurisdiction for which they are approved. Our products are for sale in Canada only and wholesalers are expected to accept this as a condition of sale. We also share concerns raised by Health Canada, that growing cross-border sales could cause drug shortages in our country.