

'Ecommerce sites should be held accountable'

By **RAGANANTHINI VETHASALAM**

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PETALING JAYA: Ecommerce or online shopping platforms should be strictly regulated when it comes to selling health-related products, says the Malaysian Medical Association (MMA).

Its president Dr Azizan Abdul Aziz said the widespread online selling of many health products that are not even registered or available in Malaysia is a cause of concern.

"Are these products that are delivered right to the doorstep of online shoppers screened by the authorities?"

"I think online shopping platforms need to bear some accountability for this.

"MMA takes a serious view of prescription drugs sold online from multiple sources around the world. It is an issue MMA has highlighted before, but no action has been taken.

"There is also no control over the widespread advertising of supplements online.

"Some of these advertisements' claims are not backed by evidence," she said here yesterday, adding that these advertisements were not screened by the Medicines Board under the Health Ministry.

While online shopping is convenient, Dr Azizan said there needs to be strict control for any health-related products.

"Consumers' willingness to spend may be taken advantage of by unscrupulous people selling fake products online.

"We need efforts from the authorities and NGOs to educate consumers on identifying genuine products online," she added.

Dr Azizan said consumers should exercise caution and check on the source when buying supplements, especially medicines.

"Check if the products are from a legitimate source, such as a licensed manufacturer or distributor.

"Some manufacturers and distributors may be selling off their old stock with short expiry at a lower market price, which is a common practice.

"There is also a lot of reselling going on online as well where retailers or individuals buy from a legitimate source and sell online," she said.

She noted that it was important that consumers check for the hologram sticker on any supplement products when shopping online.

She also called on consumers to consult a general practitioner on any supplement or medication they wish to take as it is important to rule out side effects, especially for those with underlying health issues and on long-term medication.

Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia's Prof Dr Jamia Azdina Jamal also advised consumers to be wary when purchasing extremely cheap supplements, especially when the authenticity of the products cannot be ascertained.

"Always be suspicious with offers of cheap products, unless you know the sellers," said the professor in pharmacognosy.

She noted that the authenticity of health supplements or traditional medicines can be ascertained if they are registered with the National Pharmaceutical Regulatory Agency (NPRA).

However, Prof Jamia said if a registered product of certain brands is sold at an unusually cheaper price than normal, then there is a possibility of it being a counterfeit.

"We can verify the contents of the counterfeit product against the original products in an analytical chemistry lab.

"If the products are not registered with NPRA, then there is a risk that it is either counterfeit or adulterated with conventional drugs.

"The latter is worse because the user may be taking it together with an existing medication, increasing the risk of adverse side effects or an overdose.

"For example, if a diabetic patient who is taking anti-diabetic medicines, takes an adulterated herbal supplement containing an anti-diabetic drug, that can lead to the consumer becoming hypoglycaemic (having low blood sugar levels)," she added.

Prof Jamia said another example is if a user takes a slimming product containing sibutramine unknowingly, which can lead to side effects such as a headache, dry mouth, insomnia, asthenia, obstipation and amnesia.

Public health expert and former Health Ministry official Datuk Dr Zainal Ariffin Omar said consumers should check with the ministry's pharmacy division if they are uncertain of the authenticity of a product.

"Purchasing supplements or medicines online can be risky," he said.

All pharmaceutical products, including traditional medicines and health supplements sold in Malaysia, must be registered with the NPRA. They also have a Meditag hologram and registration number.

According to the Health Ministry's website, the holograms are produced by Mediharta Sdn Bhd and are only supplied to manufacturers or importers licensed by the ministry.

Consumers can also determine if a product is registered on NPRA's website by keying in the registration number.

The Star has contacted Health Minister Dr Zaliha Mustafa and is awaiting her response as of press time.