

Experts: Chronic illness medicine bought online may put health at risk

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PETALING JAYA: Many people are willing to risk buying parallel medicines online to treat chronic illnesses.

Among the reasons cited for such purchases is the lower price for treating long-term illnesses such as diabetes or high blood pressure. But many are unaware of the danger of using medications that come from the Philippines, India, Indonesia and Thailand.

Federation of Asian Pharmaceutical Associations interim president-elect Lim Jack Shen said these parallel medications were sold openly on Facebook, Telegram and WhatsApp despite not acquiring approvals from the Health Ministry.

“Previously, the parallel medicines were available on ecommerce sites but due to the vigilance of the authorities and cooperation from such platforms, the matter was resolved.

“Once purchased, the medications are sent to the country via hand carry luggage or parcels. It is very difficult to check every parcel in the country due to the high volume handled every day.

“People buy them as they are cheaper, especially if they are dealing with chronic illnesses such as diabetes or high blood pressure,” he told The Star.

Lim pointed out the dangers of consuming these medications as they were not registered in Malaysia. Hence, they may not adhere to the strict manufacturing standards set by the National Pharmaceutical Regulatory Agency (NPRA).

The stability of the medications is also a point of concern as consumers will not have any knowledge about where they originated from and most importantly, how they were stored before reaching the buyers. The ministry requires the sale or supply of medicines, including those from online platforms that contain poison Groups B and C under the first schedule of the Poisons Act 1952, to abide by the provisions of the Poisons Act 1952 and its regulations. They also need to comply with the Sales of Drugs Act 1952 and Control of Drugs and Cosmetic Regulations 1984.

The sale or supply of medicines containing poisons on ecommerce platforms is not permitted in line with the provisions under the Act. It can only be done at physical premises specified in the licence subject to prescription requirements. Malaysian Pharmacists Society (MPS) president Amrahi Buang said almost all types of medicines were available online although there were laws regulating them.

“Controlled medicines that are not allowed to be sold online are available. There are also nutritional products or supplements as well as traditional or complementary medicines.” Malaysia also has laws related to online sales or ecommerce under the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission. All medicinal products must be registered in Malaysia by the NPRA. So, parallel import of unregistered products is against the law ,” he said.

To address the issue, he said MPS had a memorandum of understanding with Shopee and Lazada to verify pharmacies sellers on the sales of non-poison products.

He added that the rampant sale of parallel medicine online is also a global problem that must be solved.

“It is not safe practice to buy medicines online. There is no evidence of Good Manufacturing Practice and they may also be fake.

“There are also problems which are prevalent among some products. For those who use home remedies that are commercialised, they don’t necessarily include the consumption indications or comply with regulatory requirements,” Amrahi said, adding that public literacy on this issue must be raised.

Malaysian Medical Association president Dr Koh Kar Chai said: “People should be reminded that scheduled medication will need a prescription even if it is purchased online. Such items will need scrutiny as cases of counterfeit products are not unheard of.

“Do not assume that medicines bought online will be much cheaper than those bought under prescription from a pharmacy. Once the shipping cost is factored in, you may find that the actual cost will only be slightly cheaper,” Dr Koh said. People also must ensure that the medicines being advertised online are registered with the NPRA. Unregistered products may not have the desired pharmacological effect and may be even be harmful.

Parallel medicines are legally manufactured but imported with or without the permission of the manufacturers. All drugs brought into the country must be registered with the Drug Control Agency (DCA).

Consumers can look out for the registration number issued by DCA to check if a particular medicine was brought into the country by parallel importers.

The parallel importation for product registration must be justified before DCA if the same product has been registered in the country.