



OFT urges change to drug distribution deals

Britain's consumer affairs watchdog has warned that new exclusive drug distribution deals such as Pfizer's agreement with Alliance Boots could cost the National Health Service hundreds of millions of pounds.

The Office of Fair Trading (OFT) urged the government to make changes to its medicines pricing agreement with drug companies to ensure that NHS costs do not rise as a result of supply chain changes.

It also suggested the government could demand minimum service standards from manufacturers to ensure services to pharmacies and patients were not adversely affected.

John Young, managing director of Pfizer's UK business, said the company's primary concern was ensuring a secure supply chain and stable costs.

Both Pfizer and UniChem added they were pleased that the OFT had not recommended a formal investigation of the distribution scheme under competition law or a referral to the Competition Commission.

Instead, the OFT wants the government to consider exclusive distribution deals as part of its renegotiation of the Pharmaceutical Price Regulation Scheme with industry.

The new deals are fiercely opposed by independent wholesalers, who argue they stifle competition.

Pfizer says it needs the new scheme to ensure secure supplies and stamp out counterfeit entering the supply chain, which has happened on several occasions in recent years.

Online drug shopping 'widespread'

More than two million people in the UK now buy their drugs online, research published by the Royal Pharmaceutical Society (RPSGB) suggests.

Up to a third of these medicines may be fake and could seriously damage people's health, it warns. The society has launched a new logo for online chemists so shoppers know which businesses are reputable. But many people want to purchase pills without prescription, and are likely to continue to visit

unregulated sites. It is possible to obtain a prescription online, as long as that prescription is signed by a doctor. But many circumvent the process and go straight to an internet dealer, even though it is illegal to provide prescription drugs without a prescription.

There is little the RPSGB can do to protect these people, but warn them of the dangers of taking drugs which could be at best useless and at worst positively harmful, the

society said.

But what it can do is try to protect people with bona fide prescriptions or those who are buying over-the-counter drugs and who are shopping around for the best available price.

"Internet websites are a common source of unlicensed and counterfeit medicine, and consumers should exercise caution when considering the purchase of medicines in this way," a spokesperson said.

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New laws for sale of nasal decongestants

Tighter restrictions on the sale of nasal decongestants containing the agents pseudoephedrine and ephedrine will become law from April 1 this year, the Medicines and Healthcare Products Agency has confirmed.

The move is in response to growing concern about the potential for these drugs to be siphoned from over-the-counter medicines and used in the illegal manufacture of methylamphetamine, otherwise known as crystal meth.

Currently there are close to 100 authorised products containing pseudoephedrine and 17 containing ephedrine, and they are only available from a pharmacist and not GLS. There are now believed to be four incidents in England and Wales of crystal meth manufacture's using OTC medicines containing these agents.

Last year, the Agency initiated a public consultation on the issue, the outcome of which was recently considered by the Commission on Human Medicines. The Commission has now advised the MHRA to proceed with the amendments to the law by April 1, 2008, to cement its recommendation that large packs of pseudoephedrine and ephedrine should be replaced by smaller packs of 720mg and that customers should only be able to get one pack at a time.

"All stakeholders are working together to ensure the controls are effective and an Expert Group is carrying out a programme of work to monitor the situation," said Dr June Raine, Director of Vigilance and Risk Management of Medicines at the MHRA.

If these new measures are unsuccessful, pseudoephedrine and ephedrine may well be reclassified to prescription-only medicines at a later stage.

NHS Could Save Millions If People With MRSA Were Treated At Home



Contrary to what many people believe, MRSA can be treated with antibiotics. The resistance of MRSA bacteria to certain types of antibiotics makes choosing an effective antibiotic more difficult, but not impossible.

People who are colonised but do not have an active infection with MRSA (about 3% of the general population) are able to be at home without any treatment. Traditionally, people who have an infection caused by MRSA have been treated in hospital, usually by intravenous antibiotics.

Intravenous medicines need to be given by a healthcare professional, such as a nurse, and in some cases it is only the need for intravenous

antibiotics that keeps a person in hospital when they are otherwise medically fit to go home. In many cases, it is thought that if appropriate treatment was available, it would be possible for the MRSA infection to be treated outside hospital – obviously it is important that the patient has no other medical reason for staying in hospital and that this is properly explained to them.

Outside of hospital and care homes, the patient is much less likely to be challenged or infected by hospital organisms. For example, many people with MRSA, as with other *S. aureus* infections, can go home with appropriate wound dressings and regular visits from the district nurse.

For others who need **antibiotic treatment**, this could be provided for them to take in their own home or in a residential or nursing home either with oral antibiotics or with special services that provide patients with regular visits from nurses to administer intravenous antibiotics.

Studies have suggested that up to a third of people with MRSA could be discharged from hospital with an oral antibiotic.

Millions Abuse Cough Medicine

More than three million 12- to 25-year-olds have tried to get high on over-the-counter cough medicines containing dextromethorphan at some point in their lives, a large survey found. When taken in large amounts, dextromethorphan can produce hallucinations or dissociative, "out-of-body" experiences similar to those caused by the hallucinogens phencyclidine and ketamine, and can cause other adverse health effects, said a government report. "While increasing attention has been paid to the public health risk of prescription drug abuse, we also need to be aware of the growing dangers of misuse of over-the-counter cough and cold medications, especially among young people," said Terry Cline, Ph.D., administrator of the substance-abuse agency. "

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