Getting a Quick Fix Online

Do you know that right now most consumers can purchase any prescription medication online without a prescription? That's right, any consumer with a valid credit card can purchase lifestyle-enhancing medications sildenafil (Viagra) and finasteride (Propecia). They can also purchase controlled substances such as hydrocodone/acetaminophen (Vicodin), acetaminophen/codeine (Tylenol #3), or even diazepam (Valium). Gaining access to injectible testosterone and other steroids is easy. Unscrupulous entrepreneurs have even written manuals (available for purchase) that describe how to exploit the Internet for prescription medications.

How did this virtual deregulation of prescriptions occur? The problem stems from two sources: Pharmacies or entities based in other countries whose laws and regulations are less stringent than those in the United States operate freely on the Internet; and unscrupulous operators everywhere claim to diagnose conditions online without ever having met the patient. These "online pharmacies" are not pharmacies at all, because they do not conform to U.S. state and federal regulations. Most importantly, they place the consumer's health in jeopardy.

I went online and found various foreign pharmacies offering manuals for purchase in the Caribbean, Mexico, Asia, the Philippines, and many other places. I paid \$29.99 to order each of these manuals. I quickly received five glossy brochures that detailed Web sites and e-mail addresses of international pharmacies. These pharmacies had agreed to provide consumers prescription medications, no questions asked. I was able to purchase diazepam (Valium), hydrocodone/acetaminophen (Vicodin), testosterone (Deca-Durabolin), and many other medications. I ordered 30 diazepam 10 mg tablets, 30 hydrocodone/acetaminophen tablets, and 30 testosterone tablets. My orders totaled \$200.

It took nearly six weeks to receive the testosterone tablets, which arrived in a

manila envelope addressed by hand. The envelope was postmarked in Thailand.

Five months later I received the envelopes that should have contained the Valium and the Vicodin. The envelopes had been opened, were emptied, and carried a bright green sticker that read "Examined by U.S. Customs." A note (that had been photocopied so much that it was barely legible) explained that receiving the medications violated various customs laws.

One month later I received a formal notice from the Department of the Treasury, U.S. Customs Service, that the medications I had purchased were seized. The notice said that I could forfeit the medications, no questions asked, or submit a valid reason (from my physician) stating my need for the medications.

I did neither. I called U.S. Customs and described "my experiment." Since I wanted to help, I forwarded the manuals I had purchased to the customs office.

This experience helped me realize that the reason the testosterone tablets were not seized was likely because they were in a small package. The diazepam and hydrocodone/acetaminophen tablets had been sent in a bulk bottle that could be readily identified. I wondered whether the customs office's intervention was chance, spurred by recent media attention, or part of a concerted effort to control rampant abuse.

The most worrisome experience I had was with the Mexican pharmacies that I contacted via e-mail. I simply stated that I was interested in purchasing 10 flunitrazepam (Rohypnol) tablets. Rohypnol is a benzodiazepine that commonly known as the "date-rape" drug. The e-mail response I received read, "Sorry all out, check back next week."

What about these so-called pharmacies that offer Viagra, Propecia, and Xenical without a prescription? These sites aren't difficult to locate. They claim that from an online questionnaire, they can diagnose problems and assess the need for the medication. No physical

examination or prescription required. Anyone can answer these questionnaires, falsely if necessary. The message here is that the questionnaires are not reviewed; what is reviewed carefully is the customer's credit card number. Some questionnaires even have all of the correct answers pre-selected, to simplify the ordering process.

These "diagnosing" pharmacies have undergone a great deal of scrutiny and many lawsuits have been filed against them. Individual states have put in place regulations prohibiting these entities from selling prescription medications to residents within that specific state. Unfortunately, not all states have such restrictions.

Even with regulation, enforcement is difficult. These sites can operate for a short time, then simply change URLs when they come under scrutiny. Our state and federal laws do nothing to identify and track these Web sites. While the pharmacy profession is indeed over-regulated, federal regulations and funding could help identify these operators and impose heavy penalties. Our current state board investigators do not have the training, expertise, or time for this responsibility.

Unregulated purchasing of prescription drugs online is a big problem. Why aren't we hearing more about it? That's the scary part: because consumers who frequent these sites are not willing to report them. †

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