

Drugs sold online sans prescription

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Despite Risk, Biz Thrives In Absence of Policing

A prescription for disaster is being written on the internet, in India, as unauthorized buyers log on to get drugs including stimulants and anti-depressants that should be sold only with a physician's prescription. Inquiries by TOI found that plenty of websites take orders and deliver the drugs at the buyer's doorstep through courier. A call to a popular online supplier of drugs in New Delhi, which operates on the web under 'USA medications without prescriptions' tag said they sell all kinds of medicines from Xanax (anti-anxiety drug) to Ephedrine (a stimulant) and Viagra.

While legal export of drugs need a no-objection certificate from the drug controller, these couriers are sent either declared as some other material or with fake prescriptions. The drug authorities often don't scan or open the package to ascertain if the contents are as per the prescription. "Send us a prescription for any regular diabetes or heart medication pills, and we'll send you the package with any anti-depressants or stimulants of your choice. Pay with a credit card," said the Delhi-based supplier.

Investigations by the Maharashtra Food and Drug Administration (FDA) after a drug racket was busted recently found more than 20 such traders operating in India. With more than 40,000 listings for drugs on the web, anyone of any age can obtain dangerous and addictive prescription drugs. Opioids and anxiety drugs, especially in combination, account for a growing share of these consignments.

The operation is remarkably simple. Groups procure drugs without prescription from chemists and ship them out on demand. Worse, the customs department is unable to keep track.

UNHEALTHY SIGN

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- With more than 40,000 listings for drugs on the web, anyone can obtain dangerous prescription opioids and anxiety drugs
- Drug authorities often don't scan or open couriered packages and the customs department is unable to keep track



"Distributors in India tie up with agents abroad and dispatch the drugs. Most drugs seized had invalid prescriptions generated. The physicians named had no contact with the 'patients.' It is an unorganized trade and forms a minuscule part of the Rs80,000 crore drug export from India," said a senior FDA official.

The Indian gateway for transaction of drugs is not monitored. Moreover, drugs are sold online in small quantities to avoid detection. A source said buyers are mostly from the US, Canada, Europe and Japan, most of them preferring anti-depressants, anti-hypertensives, sildenafil citrate (used for erectile dysfunction) and drugs for pulmonary arterial hypertension.

FDA officials have approached the Union ministry of commerce, as well as the Drug Controller General of India (DCGI) seeking a crackdown on internet pharmacies. They also want a concrete policy to tackle the illegal drug trade.