

February 2008

Newsletter

Chairman's comment

Jim Thomson, European Alliance for Access to Safe Medicines Chair: "It seems an age ago (though in reality it is only a couple of months) that we published the major report *European Patient Safety and Parallel Pharmaceutical Trade – a potential public health disaster*. The report caused a furious reaction from those with a vested interest in preserving what is, as is clear from the report's findings, a fundamentally insecure distribution system. That was no more or less than we expected but the reality is that this Alliance stands for patients and their safety. In fulfilling our objectives, it is inevitable that we will disagree with our opponents. So be it.

Whilst now turning its attention to other equally pressing patient safety issues, this Alliance will continue to campaign for a safer supply chain. It is clear from the European Commission's reaction to our report that they are starting to share our view."

Online pharmacy research report

The Internet is the biggest unregulated market in the world, with around 200 million web users in Europe alone. Consequently, patients who choose to buy their medicines online are at particular risk of purchasing counterfeit and substandard medicines. In fact, the World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that 50% of medicines purchased from websites that conceal their physical address are counterfeit.¹ In order to assess this growing threat, the Alliance has started conducting an internet research report involving purchasing prescription only medicines (POMs) online. Our pilot study, which involved desk research of 20 online pharmacies randomly identified from Google searches and SPAM emails, has identified some worrying trends:

| Criteria | Answer (%) |
|---|------------|
| Is there a named, registered pharmacist? | No: 95% |
| Does the website require sight of a prescription? | No: 86% |
| Is the website violating brand intellectual property? | Yes: 53% |
| Is the website offering 'bulk discounts' on POMs? | Yes: 71% |

The pilot also identified that almost one hundred web addresses purporting to sell genuine medicines redirected visitors to an illegitimate online pharmacy. These sites put patients at risk by selling POMs without requiring evidence of a prescription. This practice is rife within the world of online pharmacies and represents a real patient safety threat.

The Alliance will be continuing its research, which will include testing drugs purchased from online pharmacies. The final report will aim to make consumers aware that they may be putting their lives in the hands of criminals and counterfeiters when they purchase medicines from online pharmacies.

EAASM in the European Parliament and the media

On 15 January 2008, Günter Verheugen, Vice President of the European Commission, announced that: "results of the study [a two-part European Commission study into pharmaceutical distribution channels initiated in December 2006] show that parallel trade brings a considerable risk for the safety of the patients... I will prioritise the issue of parallel trade with fake pharmaceuticals".

This statement formed part of the Vice President's response to a question posed by Mairead McGuinness, MEP for Ireland East, on 27 November 2007. Ms McGuinness asked him how the Commission planned to respond to the Alliance's recent report, which warned that counterfeit and substandard medicines are now finding their way into the European Union supply chain.

This high profile exchange firmly places the Alliance at the forefront of the fight against substandard and counterfeit medicines. It has also added to the Alliance's considerable Europe-wide media attention, generating coverage in countries including Sweden, Portugal and the UK.

EAASM funding

The Alliance is actively seeking additional funding partners and is currently finalising its 2008 funding plan. One of the key aims for this year is to broaden our funding base to include additional stakeholders. At present, the Alliance is funded by contributions from six pharmaceutical companies and we hope to engage with additional funding partners in 2008. The Alliance is also seeking funding from other commercial companies who have an interest in patient safety or counterfeit medicines. These include: technology companies, internet providers, logistics companies and financial services providers.

All Alliance members will be sent the funding plan which details the exciting new projects which the Alliance has lined up for 2008.

These projects will make a real difference to patients in Europe and we would ask all Alliance members to consider how they can help to ensure that the Alliance receives further funding. If you have any contacts who you feel may be interested in supporting the Alliance then please email enquiries@eaasm.eu.

EAASM Director

The Alliance is delighted to announce that Mary Baker, MBE, will become a Director of the Alliance, effective immediately. Mary has been an invaluable supporter since the Alliance's inception and it will be very constructive to have such a well-respected patient activist as a Director.

Mary is Patron and Immediate Past President of the European Parkinson's Disease Association (EPDA), a position she was elected to in 1992 when the EPDA was first formed. With a membership of 38 European Parkinson's Disease Patient Organisations, the EPDA is a non-profit making organisation dedicated to the promotion of the international understanding of Parkinson's Disease. Mary retired as Chief Executive of the Parkinson's Disease Society of the United Kingdom in 2001 where she had worked for 18 years, advocating the needs of people living with Parkinson's and their families, and developing methods of good practice.

Mary is also President of the European Federation of Neurological Associations, Vice President of the European Brain Council, Consultant to the WHO and Chair of the Working Group on Parkinson's Disease formed by the WHO in May 1997. In 2005 the Council of Europe appointed Mary as one of the patient representatives to serve on the Management Board of the European Agency for the Evaluation of Medicinal Products. In 2007 Mary was delighted to be appointed Honorary Member of the Parkinson's Disease and Movement Disorder Society for India. She is Director at Large for the World Stroke Association, former Patient Editor of the BMJ (now Chair of the BMJ Patient Advisory Group), member of The Association of the British Pharmaceutical Industry Code of Practice and has received an Honorary Doctorate from the University of Surrey in recognition of her work within the world of Parkinson's Disease. Mary has also received numerous awards in recognition of her work in the field of neurology, including the European Woman of Achievement Award 2000 and the Human Communication International Award 2001.



Mary Baker, MBE

Reference

1. World Health Organization. Fact sheet N°275. Counterfeit Medicines. Revised 14 November 2006. Available at: www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs275/en. Date accessed 30/01/08.