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## **BMA WARNS OF THE DANGERS OF BUYING DRUGS ON THE INTERNET**

A warning to patients about the dangers of buying prescription drugs via the internet came today (29/11/2007) from the British Medical Association (BMA). The Association wants to work with the government and the World Health Organisation to control internet sales of medicines, some of which are counterfeit and potentially harmful.

Dr Hamish Meldrum, Chairman of BMA Council, said the doctors' organisation will approach the UK government to encourage them to lead international action to deal with this issue.

Drugs for the treatment of erectile dysfunction (eg Viagra) are among those most frequently purchased from internet sites. Dr Meldrum said: "We are particularly aware that men are still a little bit wary of going to see their doctor. They may self diagnose and self prescribe via the internet. One of the messages we are trying to get over to the public is of the dangers of doing that. We want patients to be aware and to be protected and to seek appropriate advice to get proper diagnosis, and treatment."

One of the problems with self prescribing is that men will not have the underlying causes of erectile dysfunction diagnosed and treated. For some patients, said Dr Meldrum, sildenafil would be inappropriate and dangerous.

"There are two problems (with buying via the internet) you may not be getting the named drug, you may be getting an inactive substance or at worst a dangerous substance. A proper consultation with a doctor is needed."

Treatments for erectile dysfunction were a problem area because of the way NHS treatment is only available when the problem is caused by certain specific conditions such as diabetes and not available for erectile dysfunction caused by some of the other underlying problems. Dr Meldrum said the BMA had always been critical of the unfair system of permitting NHS treatment for some men with the problem and not for others.

Dr Vivienne Nathanson, Head of Science and Ethics at the BMA outlined the problems of buying drugs over the internet and counterfeit drugs. "The World Health Organisation (WHO) says that every country has counterfeit drugs and the internet adds to the problem. Counterfeits are relatively rare in most developed countries but they exist even in the UK. On average half of the drugs sold worldwide over the internet are counterfeit. Some of these counterfeit drugs have killed." She cited the example of inactive anti-malarial treatments giving rise to patients dying from malaria.

At its meeting this week BMA Council decided to engage with the WHO to look at internet prescribing and counterfeit drugs. The BMA will also approach the MRHA (The Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency) to explore the possibility of working with them on the issue of counterfeit drugs and will urge the UK Government to lead international action to deal with the internet drugs issues.

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