

**BY E-MAIL**

Kathleen Parrish

19 February 2013

Dear Ms Parrish,

I am writing in response to your e-mail of 17<sup>th</sup> December 2012 sent to Annie Dhillon at the MHRA. You asked that this e-mail be forwarded to Nimo Ahmed to address points you raise in connection with purchasing medicines on-line.

Your e-mail raised concerns about the non-availability of thyroid medication and as this is not within the MHRA's policy remit, it was necessary to seek the views of colleagues at the Department of Health who have policy responsibility for this area. I apologise for the delay in responding but having obtained the necessary information from these colleagues I can now provide a response, which addresses the points covered in your correspondence.

I was sorry to hear that you have been unhappy about the thyroid medication prescribed to you over a long period of time including some generic versions of these drugs.

As you may be aware, under their terms of service, GPs are allowed to prescribe any product, including any unlicensed product or product not licensed for a particular indication (often known as "off-label" prescribing), which they consider to be a medicine necessary for the treatment of their patients under the NHS, subject to two provisos. These are, firstly, that the product is not included in Schedules 1 or 2 to the NHS (General Medical Services Contracts) (Prescription of Drugs etc) Regulations 2004, otherwise known as the 'Selected List Scheme'; and secondly, GPs are prepared to justify any challenges to their prescribing by their primary care trust (PCT).

Practitioners are encouraged to prescribe rationally and to make the best possible use of NHS resources. It has long been the Department's policy to encourage the prescribing of medicines by their generic name, where possible, for reasons of good professional practice and because of the opportunities for more effective use of NHS resources. In England, over 83% of medicines are prescribed generically – the highest rate in Europe. A generic medicine is one which has the same active ingredients as an original (branded) product whose patent has expired. Generic medicines are generally cheaper than their branded equivalents, but are just as effective.

We are aware that there are circumstances in which generic prescribing may be inappropriate and rely on clinicians to ensure their patients are prescribed the most suitable product. There is nothing to prevent the prescribing of a particular product if the prescriber considers it essential for the patient to receive that product.

If you remain dissatisfied, you may be able to progress your complaint locally under the NHS complaints procedure;

<http://www.nhs.uk/choiceintheNHS/Rightsandpledges/complaints/Pages/NHScomplaints.aspx>

You also refer to yourself, and others being “struck off”. I hope you will understand I cannot comment on these matters but, if you or any other patient concerned wishes to make a complaint, you can again access the NHS complaints procedure;

<http://www.nhs.uk/choiceintheNHS/Rightsandpledges/complaints/Pages/NHScomplaints.aspx>

As the UK regulatory authority responsible for medicines and medical devices on the market, the MHRA takes very seriously its role in public health protection. The MHRA is increasingly concerned about the availability of medicines being offered for sale via the Internet. Medicines purchased from websites, particularly websites based overseas, cannot be guaranteed to meet set standards of quality, safety and efficacy required in the UK and consequently our advice to patients and would-be consumers is not to purchase medicines in this way.

This advice is issued against a backdrop of reports that individuals in the UK have purchased medicines online and have experienced severe adverse reactions and even death as a result of their consumption. No country remains untouched by websites illegally supplying medicines to their citizens. Electronic business transcends international boundaries and for this reason, the Internet is largely unregulated. Applying controls to products being supplied through electronic media is part of a wider global issue and individual countries are developing measures to deal with this challenge.

The MHRA is working to ensure that there is proper guidance to support the safe purchase of medicines over the internet, which it hopes will reconcile the increasing trend towards electronic commerce, including the growth of e-pharmacies supplying prescription only medicines, with the protection of individual patient safety and public health.

Information on buying medicines online is available on the MHRA website:

<http://www.mhra.gov.uk/Safetyinformation/Generalsafetyinformationandadvice/Adviceandinformationforconsumers/Buyingmedicinesonline/index.htm>

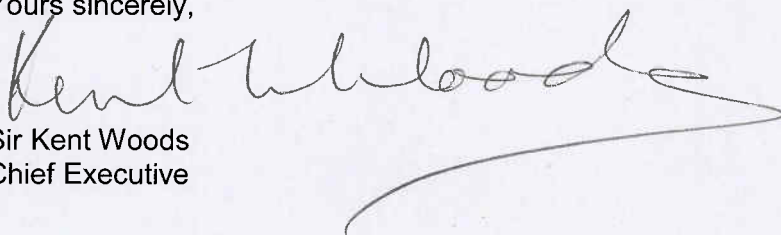
The MHRA has conducted a several publicity campaigns, together with patient associations, the General Pharmaceutical Council (the UK regulator for the retail pharmacy sector) and the pharmaceutical industry to warn people of the dangers of purchasing medicines online. In addition, the MHRA routinely monitors medicines being offered for sale on the Internet. Although websites based overseas are not caught by the scope of UK medicines legislation, with the assistance of the Metropolitan Police Central e-Crime Unit and cooperation from domain name providers, the MHRA has closed down a significant number of websites (including those based overseas) and brought into compliance hundreds more.

The MHRA is committed to and will continue to work with UK and international partners to tackle illegal online pharmacies through raising public awareness to ensure that consumers are making an informed choice, as well as tackling those who sell medicines illegally in the UK.

You may also like to know that the General Pharmaceutical Council (GPhC) operates the Internet Pharmacy Logo scheme which helps members of the public identify if a website is being operated by a legitimate pharmacy in the UK. Currently, this is currently voluntary. Also, the General Medical Council (GMC) has issued guidance to doctors on good practice concerning prescribing where they are not in face-to-face contact with the patient.

I do hope that this reply has been of help to you, but please do not hesitate to contact us again should you need to do so

Yours sincerely,



Sir Kent Woods  
Chief Executive