

Background

Buying medicines over the internet has become increasingly common over the last few years. This may allow people to buy medicines conveniently, privately and at a competitive price. Some countries, including the UK, have a registration system for online pharmacies, to help people buy prescription and over-the-counter medicines legitimately.

The internet can also be used to buy medicines without a prescription or even for medicines which are illegal in certain countries. People doing this risk buying harmful, fake or low quality medicines and could miss out on advice offered by doctors and pharmacists.

The extent of any harm currently being caused is not known but the potential for harm is great. As with all online services, the international nature of the problem makes it a difficult area to regulate.

Summary of legislation

In the UK medicines are divided by law into three broad categories:

- (1) Those that can be sold from a wide range of premises such as supermarkets, and are pre-packed ('general sale list' medicines such as ibuprofen and paracetamol).
- (2) Those that can be obtained only from registered pharmacy premises by or under the supervision of a pharmacist.
- (3) Those that can be obtained only with a prescription from a healthcare professional.

The first two categories are known as 'over-the-counter' medicines. Type two and three medicines can only be legally supplied by registered healthcare professionals, including pharmacists.

All retail pharmacies in the UK, including those providing internet services, must be registered with the General Pharmaceutical Council, and broadly similar arrangements apply in many other countries.

What medicines do people buy online?

The Royal Pharmaceutical Society has identified the most popular pharmaceuticals purchased online (or at least products being sold as such) as:

- | | |
|-----------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| Prozac (an antidepressant) | Ritalin (a psychostimulant) |
| Valium (a tranquiliser) | Serostim (a synthetic growth hormone) |
| Viagra (for erectile dysfunction) | Provigil (a psychostimulant) |

Teaching notes

Activities

1. Use the example scenario (p.3) and the suggested discussion questions (p.4) to introduce students to the issues raised by buying medicines online.
2. Students work in pairs or individually to come up with a list of possible benefits and possible harms of buying medicines online. A worksheet is provided on p.5.
3. Alternatively, distribute the provided list of harms and benefits (p.6) and ask students to rank them in order of importance (emphasise that there may not be right and wrong answers, some things are a matter of personal judgement).
4. Using either the list they created (p.5) or the list provided (p.6) students then match each benefit / harm to one or more of the ethical values (p.7&8) that are relevant to personal genetic profiling.

Further reading and resources

- *Medical profiling and online medicine, the ethics of 'personalised healthcare' in a consumer age* - Chapter 7: Online purchasing of pharmaceuticals. Available at www.nuffieldbioethics.org/personalised (click on 'chapter downloads').
- News article: 'Kent laboratory finds growing counterfeit drugs market' (17 February 2010) <http://bbc.in/bbcarticle-kentlab>
- Video clip: advert warning about the dangers of buying fake drugs online (22 April 2009) <http://bit.ly/guardianadvert>
- News article: 'Warning over internet painkillers' (5 December 2008) <http://bbc.in/warninginternetpainkillers>

- Rajesh is approaching his exams and is really struggling with his revision.
- He often feels unable to concentrate and gets distracted easily.
- His friend told him about some medication that might help him to concentrate better: a brain stimulating drug that is used to treat attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD).
- Rajesh has not been diagnosed with ADHD, but he thinks these pills his friend recommended might help him to concentrate better on his revision and help him pass his exams.
- ADHD treatments are usually prescribed by a doctor but Rajesh found out that many websites based outside of the UK advertise them and they can be bought without a prescription.
- He wants to try this medication and is considering buying some over the internet.

Rajesh, age 17



Issues to consider

- What reasons might there be for Rajesh wanting to buy this online?
- What would be the risks for Rajesh if he decided to purchase this medication online?
- What would be the differences if Rajesh had been prescribed medication by his doctor and was purchasing it online from a registered pharmacy in the UK?
- How does buying medicines on the internet differ from buying other things online, e.g. cosmetics, clothes, CDs etc?
- How does buying medicines online differ from buying them in a shop, or a pharmacy? Are these differences significant?
- What might be the consequences of ordering medicines online without consulting with your doctor first?
- Do you think people should be allowed to order medicine online if they want to? Why / why not?
- Do you think companies should be allowed to advertise prescription drugs direct to consumers? Why / why not?

Benefits and harms

Decisions about ethics often involve weighing up the potential benefits of an action or situation against the potential harms. The views of everybody affected by the decision should be taken into account.

What do you think are the main potential benefits and potential harms of buying medicines online? List your ideas in the table below.

Potential benefits	Potential harms

Summary of potential benefits and harms

Decisions about ethics often involve weighing up the potential benefits of an action or situation against the potential harms. The views of everybody affected by the decision should be taken into account.

Listed below are a number of potential harms and benefits of buying medicines online. Which do you think are the most important?

Potential benefits	Ranking	Potential harms	Ranking
Convenient way to purchase medication.		Increased danger of obtaining inappropriate medicines, particularly if purchasing prescription only drugs, without a prescription.	
You may be able to buy medicines for cheaper prices online.		Possible side effects when combined with other medicines either bought online or prescribed by health professional.	
Privacy of purchase.		Increased danger of obtaining fake or low quality medicines.	
Avoidance of potential embarrassment.		Potential for antibiotic resistance in bacteria to increase, arising from misuse of antibiotics.	

Applying ethical values

When weighing up the potential harms and benefits of developments in personalised healthcare, it is important to consider the following five ethical values. These ethical values often conflict with one another but all are important and no one value 'trumps' another.

Which of these five ethical values do you think are relevant to each potential harm or benefit identified for health information websites?

A. Privacy

Private information should be safeguarded

In a nutshell: People should be able to keep information about themselves and their health private and free from unauthorised access or use if they so wish.

The increasing amount of personal information that is available and can be tracked on the internet raises issues about the scope and limits of privacy and confidentiality for people using the internet to find health information or to buy medicines online. The same goes for genetic testing where information about an individual, such as a predisposition to disease, may be of crucial relevance to his or her family.

B. Autonomy

People should be free to pursue their own interests in their own way

In a nutshell: People should be free to make their own decisions about what happens to them.

It is widely believed that, unless there is a good reason not to, individuals should be able to make decisions for themselves and pursue their own interests in their own way.

Individuals can be thought to be the best judges of their interests, and so are likely to make better decisions in matters concerning their healthcare than others would for them, even though in practice, people rarely take decisions without consulting others they trust.

(Continued overleaf)

C. Maximising welfare

The state should act to benefit people as much as possible.

In a nutshell: *We need to help as many people as possible, while reducing harm as much as we can.*

Most governments restrict personal autonomy to some degree, or try to steer people's behaviour, in order to prevent them causing harm to themselves or others. One example of a legally enforced restriction is that people who don't wear seat belts in cars are subject to penalties. Less strict policies aim to 'nudge' people's behaviour without pushing them, for example, providing people with facilities for recycling rather than making it compulsory.

Some personalised healthcare services may be partially restricted. For example, to maximise the welfare of younger people, genetic profiling services can generally only be accessed by people aged 18 or over.

D. Fairness

Public resources should be used fairly and efficiently.

In a nutshell: *Everyone should have access to healthcare, not just people who can afford it.*

While individuals might be entitled to spend their own money wastefully or carelessly if they choose to do so, there is normally considered to be a special obligation to spend limited public resources as fairly and efficiently as possible.

New developments in medical profiling and online medicine could affect the resources available in public healthcare systems. For example, people may seek follow up appointments after they have had a genetic profiling test, and so add to NHS costs. On the other hand, people may find health information from trusted online sources rather than requiring an appointment with their GP, thus saving the NHS money.

E. Solidarity

Public policy should encourage sharing risks and working together to protect the vulnerable.

In a nutshell: *We're all in this together. We should help other people in our communities.*

It is often argued that the NHS, and similar systems of publicly-funded healthcare, embody a valuable notion of shared responsibility and of pooling risks in a way that protects the vulnerable. The principle of solidarity also involves the idea of equity in society e.g. that everyone deserves at least a minimum standard of care, support and financial security.

Some argue that this sense of solidarity is important and that trends towards 'personalisation' in healthcare will damage it.