



Singapore public cautioned about serious health risks from buying medicines from unauthorised sources

Singapore, 19 Aug 2005 – The Singapore Association of Pharmaceutical Industries (SAPI) and Singapore Medical Association (SMA) today cautioned the Singapore public against buying medicines from unauthorised sources.

In a joint statement, they said, "Procuring drugs from unauthorised sources, whether these are purchased online or during overseas trips, exposes patients to risk of counterfeit drugs that may be ineffective or even harmful.

"Singaporeans making purchases of medicines from overseas pharmacies are also advised to buy from long established and well respected pharmacies to ensure they are buying the genuine product."

The World Health Organisation (WHO) defines a counterfeit medicine as "a medicine deliberately and fraudulently mislabeled with respect to identity and/or source. Counterfeiting can apply to branded and generic products; and counterfeit products may include products with the correct ingredients or with the wrong ingredients, without active ingredients, with insufficient active ingredients or with fake packaging."

The worldwide illegal trade of fake medicines is rampant because of its lucrative trade. WHO estimates it to be worth more than S\$50 billion a year. Generally high volume (high consumption) and expensive drugs are the main targets of counterfeiters such as antibiotics, hormones and steroids.

In 2003, WHO launched a public education drive to stamp out the fast growing problem of substandard and counterfeit medicines in six Southeast Asian countries. The types of counterfeits reported to WHO include products with no active ingredients (43%); low content of active ingredients (21%); poor quality drugs (24%); wrong ingredients (2%) and wrong source (7%).

SAPI President Mr Jason Humphries said that with the advent of budget travel, more Singaporeans travel regularly to neighboring countries and many more surf the Internet, which is inundated with advertisements for cheap medicines. He said, "Fake medicines are not just about fake content or packaging. The products may have also been produced in unlicensed and unsanitary premises."

SMA President Dr Lee Pheng Soon said some doctors in Singapore have had patients coming to them with medicines from an uncertain source. He said, "These may be relatively expensive medicines required for treatment of chronic illnesses, typically bought outside Singapore or over the Internet. In other cases, they may be occasionally-used medicines, such as treatments for sexual impotence or sleeping tablets, bought in smaller quantities on impulse, from a fly-by-night salesperson on a street in Singapore."

The SMA points out that many chronic illnesses, for example, heart disease and diabetes will progress, and more advanced complications will develop, if the disease is not well-controlled by reliable medicine. A patient, who insists on using medicine of uncertain origin and quality, is simply gambling with his own health.

"Cheap might be expensive, or even fatal, if complications of adulterated drugs arise." SAPI and SMA said the only way to be safe and to benefit the most from medicines is to get the correct medicine from a reliable source, and use it as advised by the doctor.

They said, "The Singapore public should get the medicines they need from licensed pharmacies or their doctors, preferably from Singapore as the origin of the medicine is assured, and the source of drugs can always be traced if unexpected complications arise. This will not be the case with Internet purchase or purchase from other countries."

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Issued by SAPI/SMA

About SAPI

The Singapore Association of Pharmaceutical Industries has 42 members comprising multinational research-based companies, local commercial companies and distribution companies within the pharmaceutical industry.

SAPI plays two key industry roles in Singapore: Firstly, it is central to the exchange of information within the industry and, collaborates with government agencies on projects, providing input and feedback on healthcare policies. Secondly, it is the main channel of communication between the industry and various local stakeholders on health and trade-related issues, including the Ministry of Trade and Industry.

The pharmaceutical industry has invested more than S\$5 billion in manufacturing operations in Singapore, mostly in upstream manufacturing. In the current research and development pipeline, the industry is working on more than 700 new medicines and vaccines for infectious diseases such as cancer, heart disease and stroke, asthma, arthritis and osteoporosis.

A Board of Directors, managing the affairs of SAPI, is made up of members elected annually from its membership.

Fok Tai Hung
Executive Director, SAPI
Phone: 6738 0966
E-mail: foktaihung@sapi.org.sg

About SMA

Formed in 1959, the Singapore Medical Association (SMA) is the national medical organisation representing the majority of registered medical practitioners in both the public and private sectors.

While the primary objective of the SMA is to help meet diverse needs of the medical profession, the Association also plays an important role in serving the community in which its members live, work and serve.

The SMA seeks to promote the medical and allied sciences, and to emphasize a high standard of medical ethics and conduct when these sciences are applied to patient care. Within the wider community, the SMA seeks to direct understanding and opinion on health-related issues through public seminars and talks, publications, and dissemination of health-related articles where these are helpful and relevant.

As part of its direct service to the public, the SMA has also been issuing medical alert cards for drug allergies, and conducting training in emergency resuscitation.

Dr Lee Pheng Soon,
President, SMA,
Phone: 6438-3844
E-mail: lee_ps@pacific.net.sg