

Online and Easy!

Anyone with an e-mail address is likely to be bombarded with offers from Internet pharmacies for prescription medications at low cost and without a prescription. Apparently all that is needed is a credit card and a computer to access a cornucopia of prescription drugs online.

According to a 2004 white paper from the National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse (CASA), painkillers, depressants, and stimulants are readily accessible online. Out of the 157 online pharmacy sites CASA tested in early 2004, 90 percent did not require a prescription to dispense prescription drugs, including controlled substances.

Internet pharmacies are largely unregulated because the state and federal authorities with regulatory powers over pharmacies have not been able to keep up with them. For example, state authority to license and register pharmacists does not apply to Internet pharmacies, and federal legislation is not evolving quickly enough to address the problem. In addition, online pharmacy sites come and go so quickly that they are very difficult to track and regulate.

Some pharmacy sites require a prescription to be mailed or faxed, but will charge a customer's credit card and ship medication without having the prescription in hand. Some sites rely on customers to assess their symptoms to determine their diagnosis and subsequent pharmacological treatment, while still others provide online consultations with their "doctors" before dispensing prescriptions. These sites allow students to access the drugs for recreational use and also allow others to obtain large quantities to sell on campus.

Colleges and universities can minimize the on-campus marketing of these rogue pharmacies. Riley Venable, Ph.D., of Texas Southern University, said his campus has installed spam-blocking programs that

prevent advertisements from these pharmacies from reaching students' campus e-mail addresses. Limiting access to these sites in this way can restrict the availability of these drugs on campus.

According to the CASA report, in response to safety concerns about Internet pharmacy practices, federal agencies, including the U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration, the U.S. Bureau of Customs and Border Protection, and the Federal Trade Commission, have increased efforts to tackle the problem of rogue online pharmacies. But to date, federal law and regulatory practice have not yet caught up with Internet technology, and no new legislation has been enacted. ■

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