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5,000 Web Sites Selling Prescription Drugs Outside of Pharmacy Laws and Practice Standards

On December 11, 2009, the National Association of Boards of Pharmacy® (NABP®) reached a bitter-sweet milestone in its ongoing review of Web sites selling prescription medications. NABP now lists more than 5,000 Internet drug outlets as Not Recommended. These sites – 96% of the total number of sites reviewed – have been found to be out of compliance with pharmacy laws and practice standards established in the United States to protect the public health.

“There is a common misconception that prescription medications purchased from any Web site calling itself a pharmacy are safe,” says NABP President Gary A. Schnabel, RN, RPh. “Patients have grown to trust prescription medications in the US because the manufacturing and supply systems are tightly regulated to ensure safety. What many patients fail to realize, however, is that when buying medications from unknown sources online, those safeguards vanish, and the odds of getting counterfeit or substandard medication rise substantially.”

Of the 5,231 Internet drug outlets NABP had assessed since the May 2008 launch of its Internet drug outlet review program, 5,008 (96%) of the sites were found to be out of compliance with basic criteria for legitimate pharmacy practice and were posted as Not Recommended on the NABP Web site. Of the 5,008 sites listed as Not Recommended:

- More than 75% (4,029) dispense drugs without a valid prescription.
- More than half (2,762) accept a brief online questionnaire in place of a prescription. To be valid, and to ensure patient safety, a prescription must be based on a legitimate patient-practitioner relationship that has included a face-to-face physical examination.
- Nearly 25% (1,327) post a physical address located outside the US.
- Nearly half (2,436) do not provide any physical address. According to the World Health Organization, more than 50% of medicines purchased over the Internet from sites that conceal their physical address are counterfeit.
- Nearly half (2,216) offer foreign or unapproved drugs. Because these drugs are not subject to the quality and safety requirements of those approved for sale in the US – or even of those approved for sale in other developed countries – their safety and efficacy are unknown.
- Nearly 20% (956) do not have secure sites that protect patients’ personal and financial information.

Internet pharmacies listed as Recommended on the NABP Web site have been accredited by the VIPPS[®] (Verified Internet Pharmacy Practice Sites[™]) program or, for veterinary sites, the Vet-VIPPS[™] program. These Internet pharmacies have successfully completed NABP's rigorous 19-point criteria evaluation and on-site inspection to ensure they adhere to the highest standards for pharmacy practice and patient safety.

"Patients looking to purchase medications over the Internet would be well-advised to consider who is on the other end of the transaction," President Schnabel says. "Virtually anyone with a computer and a bank account can sign on to become an affiliate of a rogue network, set up a Web site using a template, and start selling drugs online. Bearing in mind that these affiliate network programs are behind thousands of Web sites selling prescription drugs, it follows that the operators of most Internet drug outlets have no knowledge of or concern for patient safety."

Knowledge is key to protecting the public from these high-tech drug dealers. NABP continues to research Web sites selling prescription drugs and report its findings to state and federal regulators, and to educate health care professionals and the public on the dangers of buying prescription drugs online, thereby empowering patients to make informed choices. More information is available in the Internet Pharmacies section of the NABP Web site, www.nabp.net.

NABP is the independent, international, and impartial Association that assists its member boards and jurisdictions in developing, implementing, and enforcing uniform standards for the purpose of protecting the public health.