

## **Caution Advised Against Online Pharmacies**

12 May 2009

DUBAI - Senior officials of the Ministry of Health (MoH) have warned against buying drugs for the swine flu over the Internet. In general too, Internet pharmacies are illegal in the UAE.

Tamiflu (oseltamivir) and Relenza (zanamivir) are two antiviral drugs found effective in treating the swine originated influenza A (H1N1), if taken within 48 hours of symptoms developing. Amid mounting fears of a global pandemic, many UAE pharmacies had reported a surge in the sale of these drugs in the past few weeks, though the country remains free of the disease.

Reports about frenzied buying of Tamiflu had recently prompted the Minister of Health to order that the drug should be given only on prescription. With a number of online pharmacies in the West now vying to sell Tamiflu and Relenza over the Net, some senior officials with the ministry cautioned residents against ordering the drug through online pharmacies.

"Internet pharmacy is illegal in the UAE. Therefore, we do not allow anyone to market any medicine and medical products through Internet here. Any company wanting to market a drug in the UAE has to register itself with the Ministry of Health," said an official.

Explaining the dangers of buying medicines from online pharmacies, the MoH official said, "The medicine they sell may be fake or of low quality. Even if they are genuine products, the way they are brought into the country would not be proper."

In April, family doctors in UK warned millions of Britons who buy drugs over the Internet as about 25 per cent of doctors had treated patients for adverse reactions caused by medicines bought on the Net. Doctors also recommended tightened regulations for online pharmacies, as those running them often have no professional qualifications.

Though the MoH has not found any instance of residents buying antiviral drugs for swine flu through online pharmacies, the official said any such attempt would be taken seriously. "If we come across any such case here, we will ask etisalat to block those sites."

Asked if any of the websites selling drugs had ever been blocked in the UAE, he said a few had been blocked earlier. The official refused to give details on these sites.

Another official said there was no mechanism to check the authenticity of online pharmacies. "Somebody sitting somewhere can fool people by claiming they are selling genuine drugs. Such online pharmacies are not regulated well even in the West. They can fool people easily. The side effects from drugs bought over the Net are well known."

He said buying antiviral drugs for H1N1 from online pharmacies made no sense as those drugs had to be administered within 48 hours. "I don't know if the so called online pharmacies can supply the medicines that fast. Since they are not confirmed for use as prophylaxis, there is no point in storing these medicines by individuals. Anyway, nobody should try it here as online shopping of any drug is illegal."

(Khaleej Times)