

Combating fake online pharmacies and unregulated medicines: roundtable report

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Foreword



Sadik Al-Hassan MP: Chair, All-Party Parliamentary Group on Pharmacy

The growth of online pharmacy services has transformed access to healthcare for millions of people. Legitimate, registered online pharmacies provide a safe, convenient and highly valuable service, allowing patients to access medicines and professional support in ways that reflect the realities of modern life. That is something we should recognise and support.

At the same time, we cannot ignore the growing threat posed by criminal operators who are exploiting that same online environment. Fake online pharmacies are taking advantage of the trust that people place in pharmacies, using the convenience, anonymity and reach of digital platforms to sell unregulated, counterfeit and potentially dangerous medicines. This is not about demonising the online space. It is about

tackling those who abuse it for criminal gain and put patient safety at risk.

The roundtable that informed this report was an incredibly helpful and constructive discussion. Participants brought together expertise from across healthcare, regulation, enforcement, industry and patient advocacy to identify both the scale of the challenge we face and some of the possible solutions. It reinforced the fact that this is a complex issue, spanning patient safety, medicines regulation, prescribing practices, enforcement, digital platforms, public awareness and wider questions of access to healthcare. There is no single lever that will solve this problem.

What was particularly encouraging was the breadth of ideas discussed. Participants explored how legitimate pharmacy providers, technology companies, search engines, social media platforms, payment providers, regulators, law enforcement agencies, the media, patients and the public all have a role to play.

“This is not about demonising the online space. It is about tackling those who abuse it for criminal gain and put patient safety at risk.”

The discussion highlighted the importance of using technology more effectively to improve patient safety, disrupt criminal activity and help the public identify trustworthy sources of medicines online.

The conversation also rightly focused on the need for a patient-centred approach. People's

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relationship with medicines is changing. Expectations around convenience, speed and accessibility have evolved, while barriers to accessing healthcare can sometimes drive individuals to seek alternative routes. To tackle fake online pharmacies effectively, we must understand why people are turning to these channels in the first place and ensure that our response reflects the realities patients face.

A clear theme throughout the discussion was the need to do more to educate and support the public. Patients need practical, accessible information about how to stay safe when obtaining medicines online, how to identify legitimate providers and how to avoid the serious risks posed by unregulated sellers. Public awareness must be at the heart of any long-term solution.

This report marks the beginning, not the end, of that conversation. The roundtable was designed to build a shared understanding of the problem and identify areas where greater collaboration is needed. There is much more to explore and discuss in depth, and this should be viewed as the first stage of an ongoing programme of work.

I am grateful to all those who contributed their expertise and insights. The findings set out in this report provide a strong foundation for future action by governments and others, and the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Pharmacy stands ready to support the next steps.

By working together, we can strengthen public confidence in legitimate online pharmacy services, protect patients from harm and develop the coordinated response this growing challenge demands.

Sadik Al-Hassan MP

Chair, All-Party Parliamentary Group on Pharmacy

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Executive summary

Legitimate, regulated online pharmacies can significantly improve safe and convenient access to medicines for many patients.

The rapid proliferation of unregulated online sellers is however exposing patients to counterfeit, ineffective and potentially dangerous medicines. Fake online pharmacies represent a growing and significant threat to patient safety, driven by organised criminal activity exploiting digital platforms, consumer demand and gaps in online enforcement.

To explore this issue, the General Pharmaceutical Council (GPhC) convened a roundtable chaired by Sadik Al-Hassan MP, Chair of the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Pharmacy, and involving parliamentarians, regulators, representatives from the pharmacy and pharmaceutical sectors, and patient organisations. Participants agreed that fake online pharmacies are a complex, international challenge that cannot be addressed by any single organisation. A coordinated, whole-system response is required, combining stronger enforcement, greater accountability for online platforms, disruption of criminal business models, improved identification of legitimate providers and more effective public awareness campaigns.

The discussion highlighted the scale of the problem, with significant numbers of illegal online pharmacy sites operating globally, many of which target UK consumers through search engines, social media and misleading advertising. Demand is fuelled by a combination of healthcare access pressures, affordability concerns, the convenience of online purchasing and growing interest in medicines such as weight management treatments.

The participants identified a range of potential interventions, including closer collaboration with search engines and payment providers,



Sadik Al-Hassan MP, Gisela Abbam OBE (GPhC Chair) and Kathie Cashell (GPhC Chief Executive) at the roundtable

strengthened verification systems for legitimate pharmacies, enhanced public reporting tools and expanded public awareness campaigns. While individual measures may help reduce risks, there was strong consensus that no single solution will be sufficient. Protecting patients will require sustained collaboration across regulators, government, healthcare providers, digital platforms and industry partners.

The roundtable concluded that tackling fake online pharmacies must be a public safety priority. Action is needed to reduce both the supply of illegal medicines and the access to fake online pharmacies that enables them to thrive, while maintaining public confidence in legitimate online pharmacy services.

The All-Party Parliamentary Group on Pharmacy will review this report and consider the potential interventions and actions that were suggested by participants at the roundtable. The APPG on Pharmacy will then make recommendations to the Government, the pharmacy sector, regulators and others, on actions to combat fake online pharmacies and the supply of unregulated medicines.

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1. Overview

- 1.1 The GPhC convened a roundtable bringing together parliamentarians, regulators, industry representatives and patient organisations to discuss the risks posed by fake online pharmacies and their impact on patient safety.
- 1.2 The event was chaired by Sadik Al-Hassan MP, Chair of the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Pharmacy, who emphasised in his opening remarks that this is fundamentally a public safety issue, driven by criminal exploitation of online channels rather than online provision itself. He highlighted the importance of avoiding stigma around legitimate online services while addressing patient risk.
- 1.3 The discussion aimed to build a shared understanding of the scale of the issue, the reasons behind patients using unregulated sources, and discuss what coordinated action was needed to reduce harm.

"This is an international issue, with websites being hosted in and products coming from multiple countries, meaning that cross-border collaboration is needed."
Gisela Abbam OBE, GPhC Chair

2. Key messages

- 2.1 Participants agreed on several core messages:
 - Fake online pharmacies present a direct and significant risk to patient safety

- The issue is driven by criminal exploitation of digital platforms
- No single organisation can address this alone; collective, system-wide action is essential
- Effective responses must combine:
 - stronger enforcement
 - disruption of illegal business models
 - clearer identification of legitimate providers
 - improved public awareness

3. Scale and nature of the problem

- 3.1 Kathie Cashell, Chief Executive and Registrar of the GPhC, noted in her opening remarks that the rapid growth in online pharmacy services could provide safe and convenient access to medicines. However, there is also a proliferation of illegal operators exploiting gaps in oversight, jurisdictional complexity and the anonymity of the digital space and posing a significant risk to patients.
- 3.2 Fake and unregistered pharmacies are illegally supplying counterfeit or unsafe medicines, risking patient safety and undermining confidence in legitimate pharmacy services. These medicines can harm patients, increase pressure on the NHS and may cost lives.
- 3.3 Legitimate pharmacies are increasingly being impersonated, including cloned websites and misuse of GPhC registration numbers. The GPhC, as the regulator, can only directly oversee legitimate providers so there is a need for collaboration with the Medicines and Healthcare Products

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Regulatory Agency (MHRA) and the wider system to increase the identification of fake online pharmacies.

3.4 Gisela Abbam OBE, Chair of the GPhC, noted that this is an international issue, with websites being hosted in and products coming from multiple countries, meaning that cross-border collaboration is needed.

3.5 Dr Alison Cave, Chief Safety Officer at the MHRA, spoke about the scale of the problem and gave an overview of the work that the MHRA is doing to combat it.

3.6 Dr Alison Cave highlighted that fake online pharmacies are part of a broader trend of high-volume, low-risk online criminal activity. Precise numbers of sites involved are hard to obtain as they are often hosted outside the countries they supply to, and can appear and disappear very quickly, making enforcement and removal complex.

3.7 The types of medicines frequently involved include sedatives, strong painkillers, erectile dysfunction medicines, and weight management medicines.

4. Impacts on patients and public safety

4.1 The discussion reinforced the real-world consequences, including patients receiving counterfeit, ineffective or unsafe medicines.

4.2 Dr. Stephen Pike, Clinical Advisor to the Royal College of General Practitioners (RCGP) explained the range of issues with these medicines, including:

- Incorrect ingredients – alternative ingredients might be more potent or

contain impurities such as mercury, arsenic or cement

- Insufficient active ingredients – making the medicine less effective
- No active ingredients – the counterfeit medication is only a placebo
- A lack of regulatory control over safety, effectiveness or the quality of the manufacturing process.

4.3 Dr Stephen Pike emphasised that the harm caused by fake medicines, or medicines which a patient has not been prescribed, can lead to serious complications, under or over-dosing, and interactions with other medication. This imposes a burden on the healthcare system, increasing demand for acute services.

4.4 Patients often do not understand the dangers of unregulated medicines and there can be particular confusion around products which can be perceived as 'aesthetic', including those used for weight management. Social media posts can give the impression that these are simple, risk-free and widely available solutions when in fact they are prescription only medicines which should be supplied by a registered healthcare professional.

4.5 Media and social media portrayals of weight management medicines have driven significant demand, but there is limited access to them via the NHS. This leads consumers to try to find them as cheaply as possible, and **a recent survey** found that 21% of the approximately 2.5 million GLP-1 users in the UK had not had them prescribed by a health professional. Cases of serious complications have been reported when patients access weight

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management medicines inappropriately or their use is not clinically monitored.

- 4.6 Dr Stephen Pike suggested that the use of unregulated medicines is likely to get worse. Oral versions of some weight management medications have now been licensed by the MHRA for use in the UK. Concerns have been raised, including by the Health and Social Care Committee (HSCC) that GLP-1 pills may be easier to counterfeit than the injections and are likely to be sold on the black market. Other medicines which are not yet licensed and still in clinical trial are also being sold illegally online.

5. Drivers of patient behaviour

- 5.1 Participants agreed that addressing demand is a key area for action.
- 5.2 Rachel Power, Chief Executive of the Patients' Association spoke about **their recent research**, commissioned by Lilly, which found that patients who use fake online pharmacies often being driven by necessity rather than choice and the importance of awareness campaigns being empathetic rather than judgmental.
- 5.3 The research found that the use of fake online pharmacies is shaped by a complex mix of healthcare access issues, consumer demand and digital convenience, with key factors including:
- difficulties accessing GP services and long waiting times for both primary and secondary care
 - addiction
 - cost pressures, especially for patients with chronic conditions
 - the convenience and privacy of online purchasing

- exposure to targeted advertising, including AI-generated and misleading content
- a disparity between what a healthcare professional feels the patient needs and what the patient actually wants

- 5.4 Some patients, particularly those facing long waiting times, cost pressures, or wanting a medication that is not available to them via legitimate sources, may understand the risks but feel they have no alternative. Participants at the roundtable also heard from Hameed, a Patient and Public representative, who discussed the experiences of people in his community in accessing medicines from unregulated sources, and shared his views on why patients and the public may use fake online pharmacies or other routes to obtain medicines.

6. Public awareness and engagement

- 6.1 During the roundtable discussion, there was strong consensus that there needs to be more public awareness about the risks of buying medication from fake online pharmacies. It is also important patients understand how to distinguish legitimate regulated providers from fake ones. Everyone should play a significant role in communicating and raising awareness of this, including legal providers and representative organisations such as the Digital Clinical Excellence Forum (DiCE UK), who should support regulatory requirements to improve public confidence. However, it is important that campaigns do not shame patients for the choices they have made. They should instead provide practical, actionable

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guidance on how to safely access medicines online.

- 6.2 Traditional channels were not likely to reach the patients affected by the issues cited above, and channels such as social media, community networks and patient fora were more likely to be successful. Targeting physical messaging to areas such as community spaces, campuses and gyms could also be effective.
- 6.3 The MHRA's **#FakeMeds campaign** was highlighted as an effective model, using targeted digital channels to reduce demand and improve patient safety outcomes.

7. Current activity

- 7.1 Speakers outlined ongoing work across organisations. The MHRA is carrying out enforcement activity including disrupting illegal websites, working with Border Control to intercept fake medicines and using advanced technology to track criminal activity and financial flows. It also works with online marketplaces to remove illegal medicines from sale and is developing a public website-checking tool.
- 7.2 The GPhC maintains the public register of legitimate online pharmacies, sets standards for them and inspects them. It is enhancing its online register so that users will be able to verify pharmacies by web address (in addition to name and registration number) and has recently launched a **social media campaign** highlighting the risks of fake online pharmacies and explaining how to buy medicines safely online.

8. Opportunities for action

- 8.1 Participants agreed that no single intervention will solve the problem. A combination of measures is likely to be required, with each option needing further assessment for effectiveness, cost and unintended consequences. Registered pharmacies and other regulated healthcare services also have a collective responsibility to protect patients by ensuring high standards of care and helping people distinguish legitimate services from illegal providers.
- 8.2 Several opportunities for action were discussed at the roundtable, that will now be considered by the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Pharmacy. The suggestions for action included:

Online platforms

- 8.3 Search engines such as Google and Bing could significantly reduce consumer exposure to illegal pharmacies by demoting or removing offending websites, prioritising GB-registered pharmacies in search results and displaying warnings about sites reported by regulators.
- 8.4 Content moderation – the MHRA has already worked with eBay to block the illegal sale and supply of medicines in the UK using AI technology. Social media post moderation is likely to be more difficult but the Online Safety Act 2023, while not specifically referencing medicines, could still be relevant in terms of the responsibilities it places on platforms to protect users from harm which Ofcom are now actively enforcing.

Payment providers

- 8.5 Payment providers could help disrupt illegal sales by withholding payment

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services from sites that are not registered pharmacies. Visa and Mastercard have already done this in the U.S.A where they will only provide payment services to online pharmacies registered with the Healthcare Merchant Accreditation scheme. They could also use regulatory intelligence such as the MHRA's 'not recommended' list to block transactions linked to illegal sellers.

‘.pharmacy’ domain

- 8.6 Participants at the roundtable discussed that one of the best ways to address fake online pharmacies is to promote to the public that genuine online pharmacies will be on the GPhC's register, and give the pharmacies better tools to identify themselves as legitimate and safe.
- 8.7 The '.pharmacy' domain name is used by over 60% of pharmacies in the U.S.A and Canada, including national and local chains as well as many independent pharmacies. This allows consumers to easily identify that they are using a legitimate online pharmacy but does carry a cost for the pharmacy. The domain is used by search engines, including Google and Bing, and credit card companies to restrict advertising and payments.

Logo

- 8.8 A UK version of the EU Common Logo Scheme could help consumers identify legitimate online pharmacists as the logo links directly to the national regulator's register entry for that business. Logos can be copied or misused by fake pharmacies, so there would need to be technical safeguards, with associated costs, and mandatory use of a logo may require legislative change.

QR codes and bar codes

- 8.9 Medicines already carry identifiers which allow the dispensing pharmacy to check their authenticity. Some manufacturers have introduced patient-facing authentication systems which allow the patient to scan a QR code on their medication to verify its authenticity. Wider adoption of these systems could improve detection of counterfeit medicines and strengthen patient confidence.

Access to medicines

- 8.10 Research from the Patients Association indicates that access barriers to NHS services (including not being eligible for certain services or medicines on the NHS, and long waiting times to access services) are a major driver in patients' decisions to purchase medicines online and from unregulated sources.
- 8.11 Participants discussed that improving access via the NHS to medicines that are regularly purchased online (such as weight management medicines), including by reviewing the criteria for those eligible for them, would help to reduce the number of people who may procure them from unregulated sources.

Public awareness campaigns

- 8.12 While organisations such as the GPhC and MHRA already run public awareness campaigns, these can be limited in reach. Government or NHS funding could allow expanded campaigns to improve public understanding of the risks of buying medicines from illegal sources and how to identify legitimate providers.
- 8.13 These public awareness campaigns should be co-designed and delivered in partnership with patients and the public.

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8.14 Search engines could help amplify these messages by directing users searching for medicines towards trusted information and advice.

9. Key conclusions

9.1 Participants agreed that no single intervention would be sufficient and a layered, system-wide approach will be needed. Government leadership will be essential to bring together the range of partners involved, align action across the system, and ensure that all stakeholders—including technology companies, regulators, healthcare organisations and law enforcement agencies—play their part. Participants noted that there has been limited action and engagement to date from the technology companies that own search engines and major social media platforms. As a result, governments may need to introduce legislative and regulatory changes to place clearer responsibilities on these companies and require them to take effective action to significantly reduce consumers' access to unregulated online sources of medicines.

9.2 Actions must address both supply and demand, with governments and the NHS in each UK nation working alongside regulators and other agencies to restrict access to fake online pharmacies while also educating patients about the risks through targeted, empathetic and practical public messaging.

10. Next steps

9.3 The All-Party Parliamentary Group on Pharmacy will review this report and make recommendations to the Government on

actions to combat fake online pharmacies and the supply of unregulated medicines.

9.4 Participants at the roundtable were asked to make pledges for how they and their organisations will support this ongoing work. In these pledges, participants expressed their commitment to raising this issue across their organisations and networks, and supporting the cross-sector work initiated by this roundtable.

9.5 The GPhC will continue to work closely with all participants and key partners to further explore options to tackle fake online pharmacies and the supply of unregulated medicines, and to raise awareness among patients and the public about the importance of only using registered pharmacies when sourcing medicines online.

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Participants at the roundtable

10 Organisations represented at the roundtable

General Pharmaceutical Council
Medicines and Healthcare products
Regulatory Agency
All About Obesity
ASOP EU – Alliance for Safe Online
Pharmacy
Association of the British Pharmaceutical
Industry
Care Quality Commission
Company Chemists' Association
Department of Health and Social Care
Digital Clinical Excellence Network
General Medical Council
Healthcare Improvement Scotland
Independent Pharmacies Association
Lilly
National Pharmacy Association
Royal College of General Practitioners
Royal College of Pharmacy
The Patients' Association
Welsh Government