

Online chemists group as shops hold strike

OUR SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT

New Delhi, Oct. 14: A coalition of online medicine vendors has pledged they would sell drugs only "in accordance with" existing laws, seeking to allay concerns raised by retail chemists who remained shut nationwide today opposing online drug sales.

Eleven companies offering medications through online transactions today established the Indian Internet Pharmacy Association (IIPA), claiming the move is intended to protect public health by ensuring that its members follow laws relating to drugs and pharmacies.

"The IIPA will cater to the Indian public's demand for safe and easily accessible medicines at affordable prices," the association said in a media release announcing its formation.

The IIPA has emerged on a day retail chemists across the country remained closed in protest against the Union health ministry's move to ask a panel of drug regulators to examine trends in online sales of medicines and suggest ways to regulate such activity.

The All India Organisation of Chemists and Druggists (AIOCD) that called the single-

day strike wants the government to curb online sales of medications, saying this trend could expose patients to risks and harm the business interests of nearly 600,000 retail and about 200,000 wholesale chemists.

The IIPA has said it will make sure its members adhere to the rules that govern pharmacies and dispensation of prescription medicines. Member companies say only qualified pharmacists will dispense prescription drugs only to customers who present valid prescriptions.

The websites of online vendors, some of which offer discounts of up to 15 per cent on the prices of medicines, demand prescriptions be uploaded. The AIOCD has pointed out that pharmacies lack mechanisms to validate the genuineness of prescriptions.

But IIPA members say this is not a problem specific to online sales. "Many retail shops sell drugs to patients without prescriptions," said Varun Gupta, vice president of medical affairs at an online pharmacy. "We will at least maintain an audit trail to show who has taken what medicine."

A senior independent pharmacologist said drug companies are likely to be enthusiastic about online sales

as direct sales to patients routed through online vendors would allow them to save on up to 30 per cent margins on costs they have to pass on to wholesale and retail outlets.

"But how will this help patients, I haven't seen any argument to explain how online sales can benefit patients," said Chandra Gulhati, a pharmacologist and editor of the *Monthly Index of Medical Specialities, India*.

"To say that patients can enjoy the convenience of ordering their medicines from home is not an adequate explanation — India lacks the online database of doctors to verify prescriptions," Gulhati said.

"Online sales will also raise the issue of how temperature control will be maintained — some drugs, including certain antibiotics, need to be maintained in a refrigerator."

The Union health ministry had said on Tuesday that the panel of drug regulators has had "preliminary discussions with stakeholders" over the issue of online sales of medications. In a statement, the ministry said the panel's mere examination of representations made to the government should not be construed as the intention of the government to permit any sales.

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