

Pill or poison?

People who are pressed for time are increasingly ordering their medicines online. But this has kicked up a storm, with chemists and activists calling for a ban on online sales. The matter is now in court. **Kavitha Shanmugam** looks at the rumpus

The young girl thought it was the easy way out. Instead of buying abortion pills from the local chemist and courting embarrassment, she ordered them online. She swallowed them — and had to be hospitalised.

Her Mumbai college lecturer, Mayuri Mithun Patel, a social activist at heart, was appalled — and stirred up enough to file a petition in the Mumbai High Court. Patel asked the Maharashtra government to ban websites selling medicines under schedules H & X (drugs like sleeping, depression and abortion pills which cannot be purchased without a doctor's prescription), violating Rule 65 of the Drugs and Cosmetics Rules, 1945.

Increasingly, people who are pressed for time are ordering their medicines and other pills online. But this has kicked up a storm, with chemists and activists calling for a ban on online sales. Patel submitted the names of 20 online pharmacies, largely based in the United Kingdom and Canada, which were supplying drugs online without asking for a prescription.

Her public interest litigation trig-

gered a chain of events. The Maharashtra government told the court that a sub-committee had been formed by the Drugs Consultative Committee under the chairmanship of Harshdeep Kamble, Commissioner of Maharashtra's Food and Drugs Administration, to study how the online sale of medicines could be regulated.

According to a ministry of health and welfare official in New Delhi, it will be "months" before a decision is taken. "Several druggists and chemists want us to move quickly and stop the online sale of medicines. But we cannot do that unless there are amendments to the law, the Drugs and Cosmetics Act, 1940. That will take time," the official says.

Not all website chemists are for the campaign. Some registered bodies want the government to draw a line between registered and non-registered medicine sellers. A body of online pharmacists called the India Internet Pharmacy Association (IIPA) has suggested that a specific central licence for qualified online players be displayed prominently on a

website or an app. It will look like a seal and help consumers identify a legitimate operation, it argues.

There are many ways of streamlining the online medicine sale business, insiders hold. Prashant Tandon, president, IIPA, and co-founder of online pharmacy lmg.com (formerly healthkart.com), stresses that online pharmacy portals should be given a licence only if they follow standard operating procedures — such as maintaining records of prescriptions and a full record of all transactions to be made available for audits.

Steps, clearly, have to be taken soon because online pharmacies are turning into the next big thing in the Indian e-commerce space.

The convenience of having your medicines dropped off at your doorstep is drawing more and more people to online pharmacies. On top of that, many offer good discounts

and attractive marketing sops such as pill reminders, interaction alerts and side effect warnings.

The most popular drugs sold online are the ones used for chronic diseases such as heart disorders, blood pressure, asthma and diabetes. Vitamins and supplements are popular, too. These sites

seldom focus on emergency pills such as antibiotics and painkillers because online medical portals usually take more than two days to deliver their medicines.

There are more than 15-20 players in this space recognised by the IIPA. Among them are

Bookmeds, mChemist, Medidart, Medlife, Netmeds, Zigycare (PM Health and Life Care), SaveOn-Medicinals, Save-mymeds and lmg.com. Big

healthcare companies like Apollo Pharmacy have opened online versions.

"The profit margins from the pharmaceuticals market are any-

where between 16-20 per cent or more and the online firms are pitching for a share in the Rs 93,000-crore pharmacy market," says Pradeep Dadha, founder and CEO of netmeds.com, a site launched this June by the 100-year-old Chennai based pharmaceuticals firm, Dadha Group. Others like the AWACS PharmaTrac estimate the market to be about \$13-15 billion (Rs 85,000-Rs 99,000 crore).

Not surprisingly, angel investors are jumping into the fray. They have invested about Rs 615 crore in online pharmacies since 2011. OrbiMed, a healthcare-focused investment firm, invested about Rs 330 crore into netmeds.com, according to Venture Intelligence, which monitors private company financials, transactions and valuations in India.

Netmeds.com has tied up with India Post and a few couriers to deliver medicines in 300 cities in India.

Profit margins in medicines are higher than in the e-grocery market, says Atit Jain, co-founder of Pluss, a hyperlocal delivery startup for health and medical needs. Jain has tied up with 15 pharmacies in and around Delhi to deliver medicines, baby care and pet care products and daily essentials. "Offline pharmacies need to realise that this is a smarter way of doing business since we are giving them more clients," Jain argues.

Most of the e-pharmacies have tied up with local pharmacies or with established stockists and suppliers. So the criticism levelled at e-pharmacies that they are operating without pharmacists does not hold, says IIPA's Tandon, who works with 25 vendors.

"There is clearly a lack of understanding of the model followed by the marketplace platforms. All dispensation happens at an offline retail store, which has a licence and pharmacist as required by the Drugs and Cosmetics Act," Tandon explains. Medicines sold online can be traced right down to the batch number and invoice better than in the offline model, making the transactions transparent and authentic, he claims.

Some online sites do sell prescribed drugs. But those, IIPA general secretary Kiran Divakaran, founder of the online portal Medidart, believes are "fly-by-night" operators.

The pharmacist debate is similar to the one that broke out when people started buying groceries from the Internet. "Did the *kirana* stores (local groceries) shut after e-grocery got popular," asks Dadha. "Both can co-exist."

But brick-and-mortar stores are uneasy about the e-pharmacy boom. Members of the All India Organisation of Chemists and Druggists (AIOCD) have been ordering prescription drugs online to demonstrate that the law is being broken by the online sellers.

"Some of our members are so passionate about exposing this illegal activity that they spend most of their time ordering drugs online and proving that online retail of medicines is harmful for our country," says AIOCD president J.S. Shinde. "Nobody knows how qualified these online sellers are. Let there be clear rules for everybody," Shinde adds.

A veteran pharmaceutical expert and pharma industry consultant, however, stresses that chemists' shops do not follow the rules either. "Few chemists have computerised records. They lack qualified pharmacists and every

