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WORLD WIDE WORRY

Although most people would say that they have benefited from the existence of the world wide web, there are many potentially dangerous drawbacks to it. Among them is the ease with which prescription-only medicines can be obtained through it — an issue recently highlighted by the death of a student who was able to buy hundreds of painkillers, tranquillisers and antipsychotics online for his own use.

United Kingdom medicines legislation was originally designed to protect patients from unscrupulous practitioners and unsafe treatments. The legislation predates the internet, which now makes it possible to exploit an exemption that was put in place for the legitimate health reason of allowing continuing treatment during occasional international travel (see News Feature, p202).

As a result, quite legally, it is possible to obtain prescription-only medicines in the UK by having a “virtual” consultation with a doctor (by means of completing an online questionnaire), after which the doctor issues a private prescription for a pharmacist to dispense. Obtaining medicines from other parts of the world can be even easier — by ordering and paying online using a credit card — with the additional problem that what you receive may be of dubious quality.

For UK residents, at least, this gives legal access to powerful and potentially dangerous medicines without any control, because the legislation focuses on the activities of the supplier, and the purchaser (with the exception of Controlled Drugs) is entitled to obtain whatever he or she can.

Tougher legislation needs to be put in place to protect vulnerable individuals. The difficulty is framing legislation that does the job without being impossible to police.

For example, New Zealand medical council rules require a doctor to have met a patient in a face-to-face consultation at least once and for the patient to be under that doctor’s care before a prescription is issued. “Virtual” consultations as in the UK would be illegal. Other countries, like the United States and Germany, have strict import/export legislation, but this is designed to protect licensing agreements more than individual purchasers.

Since it would be impossible to police the import and export of all small packages, and the likelihood of worldwide agreement on the prescription of medicines across borders is equally remote, access to medicines through the internet is a problem that is set to increase. Warning people of the potential dangers of making these purchases may, sadly, be all that can be done.