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More than 100 people harmed by illegal health products since 2012



(From left): Some illegal health products seized; they include steroids and sleeping pills; creams that promise both "extra whitening" effects and a "face lift"; and products popular with gym goers. PHOTOS: HEALTH SCIENCES AUTHORITY

HSA warns against buying cheap products that promise instant cures from unknown sources

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Senior Health Correspondent

If it sounds too good to be true, it is probably not good for your health. The Health Sciences Authority (HSA) has warned against snapping up health products from unknown suppliers that promise instant cures or are being offered at unusually low prices. An HSA spokesman said: "Products sold are usually cheaper and appear to be of better value, but could contain unsafe or inferior ingredients, or could have been produced under poor manufacturing meth-

ods and stored under standard or unhygienic conditions." More than 100 people here have been harmed by such illegal health products since 2012, with more than 50 needing to be hospitalised. Some suffered permanent injury or debilitation. Four have died as a result of taking illegal health products - one for slimming and the other three for pain. Earlier this year, a woman in her 50s ended up with severe heart failure after taking a weight loss product she bought through Instagram. She needed a defibrillator implanted to regulate her heart rhythm, and long-term heart fail-

ure medication. Like her, the vast majority of those who bought such products were aged over 40, with more women than men. Three in five were looking for pain relief. Dr Tan Kian Hian, a senior consultant in pain medicine at Singapore General Hospital, said many of the older people who buy these "health products" believe they are safe, effective and have no side effects. "This is especially so when they are marketed as natural and herbal," he said. Some of these products do give short-term relief, said Dr Tan. He pointed out that the Seahorse Chop Du Zhong Ba Ji Wan flagged by the HSA as an illegal health product contains a potent steroid. When used appropriately, it is an effective treatment for pain. But

the side effects, Dr Tan said, include pushing up blood pressure and increasing blood glucose levels, causing weight gain and thin skin. In spite of a general increase in online purchases, they accounted for only one in 10 of the illegal health products picked up by the HSA through reporting by hospitals and clinics, or by the users themselves. The majority were bought overseas, from street peddlers here or from people recommended through word of mouth. The HSA spokesman said the actual number of people affected by such products is likely to be higher than reported. She said: "Some consumers may not see a doctor when they experience adverse effects and some may not link them to the health products that they have purchased.

"What is clear though is that adulterated health products continue to be sold on e-commerce and social media platforms." The HSA monitors local websites "and regularly takes down postings of suspicious products", she added. Last year, working closely with Web administrators, the HSA removed an average of 100 Web postings a month. "All sellers were issued advisories or warnings... Recalcitrant offenders would be investigated and could be liable for prosecution," the spokesman said. Sexual enhancement products and those promising weight loss also rank high on the list of popular but dubious health offerings, accounting for one in four products that have made people sick. The penalty for selling illegal health products is a fine of up to

\$100,000 and/or imprisonment of up to three years. Nine people have been prosecuted since 2014. They include a 45-year-old man who was jailed for 18 weeks for importing and selling sexual enhancement products that included sildenafil, a prescription medicine for erectile dysfunction. Meanwhile, one person was fined \$15,000 for selling drugs for sexual enhancement and another fined \$12,000 for selling slimming drugs. Illegal health products sensationally hit the headlines in 2002 when actress Andrea De Cruz suffered liver failure and almost died after taking dubious slimming pills. Her then boyfriend and current husband, Pierre Png, gave part of his liver to her in a transplant. salma@sph.com.sg



Madam Wee Ah Miow, with her daughter Annie Lim (left) and Dr Adeline Lam, made plans for her future care in 2017 after the new advance care planning system at Tan Tock Seng Hospital was up and running. ST PHOTO: CHONG JUN LIANG

More TTSH patients doing advance care planning

Felicia Choo

More patients at Tan Tock Seng Hospital (TTSH) have been making plans for their future care. In 2011, the hospital introduced its advance care planning (ACP) system, which documents a person's future healthcare preferences so that his family members and doctor can use this information when, in case of a medical emergency, a patient cannot speak for himself. New figures show that 1,279 patients had signed up to the system last year, up from 415 in 2013. But Dr Adeline Lam, who is leading the initiative, thinks that even more patients can take up the discussion to plan for their future health and personal care, including those who currently do not have any medical conditions. The scheme was initiated by the Singapore Government in 2011, modelled on the Respecting Choices programme in the United States. Before 2011, TTSH staff would

discuss ACP with patients on an ad hoc basis, which was one of the reasons for the low take-up rate. "It is not an easy discussion, especially in Asia where there is a lot of taboo and superstition about death," said Dr Lam, who is a consultant in the general medicine department. "Some relatives feel that by having this discussion, they are taking hope away." Other factors that have stalled these discussions are people having a lack of time or not knowing much about ACP. The hospital has since used a three-pronged approach to bump up numbers: spreading public awareness of ACP; training general medicine doctors about it; and asking patients who are in their 60s and 70s - and have more serious medical conditions - about making such plans. Last year, 594 TTSH staff were trained in ACP, up from 142 in 2013. Madam Wee Ah Miow, 87, is one patient who made plans in 2017 after the new system was up and running. While the stroke survivor had

frequent conversations with her children about how she preferred not to have surgery for her medical conditions, her plans were not formally documented. "I don't want to trouble people and be dependent on them," said Madam Wee. "I'd rather go if I become bedridden." It also helped that the planning was done with her doctor of 11 years - Dr Lam. ACP sessions take about an hour and while they are free at some places, others charge around \$30, said Dr Lam. ACP facilitators can be found at other hospitals and medical centres, such as National University Hospital, Alexandra Hospital, Khoo Teck Puat Hospital (KTPH), Singapore General Hospital, National Heart Centre Singapore and Changi General Hospital. At KTPH, the number of advance care plans has jumped from 196 in 2013 when the programme was piloted, to 515 last year. feliciac@sph.com.sg

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