

Press release: MHRA cracking down on organised crime worth £200m

The Medicines and Healthcare Regulatory Agency (MHRA) is cracking down on the diversion of Prescription-Only Medicines (POM) onto the criminal market, after first becoming aware of [a significant diversion of benzodiazepines and other hypnotics/anxiolytics in 2016](#).

During 2017 MHRA expanded operations to 19 active investigations and have made more than 40 arrests. Our investigations have revealed an extensive network of criminality involving businesses such as wholesale dealers and a small number of registered pharmacies throughout the UK diverting medicines.

Between 2013 and 2016 an estimated £115-200m of medicines were diverted from the legitimate supply chain onto the criminal market, putting thousands of vulnerable people at risk.

The independent review into dependence and addiction to prescription drugs, recently announced by the Department of Health and Social Care, highlights the scale of the problem. The review will be looking into the results of a recent Home Office survey which found 7.6% of adults had taken a prescription-only painkiller not prescribed to them.

Arrests have been made for offences such as possession with intent to supply a controlled drug, and offences under the Proceeds of Crime Act.

The focus of our investigation is Prescription-Only Medicines such as benzodiazepines and anxiolytics including Diazepam and Zopiclone as well as the painkiller Tramadol.

These medicines are being sold through websites acting illegally, and people should be careful when buying medicines online. Criminals are known to exploit vulnerable people by selling medicines through unregulated websites and stealing their credit card details.

Self-diagnosis and self-medication can be dangerous. All of the Prescription-Only medicines currently being investigated have the potential to result in addiction. However, when these are appropriately prescribed there are measures in place to reduce this risk including restrictions on the dose or duration of treatment.

There is no indication this criminality has led to medicines shortages or issues with the legitimate supply of medicines to the public and medicines supplied with a prescription, through registered pharmacies, are unaffected.

Alastair Jeffrey, MHRA Head of Enforcement, said:

Selling medicines outside of the regulated supply chain is a serious criminal offence and we are working relentlessly with

regulatory and law enforcement colleagues to identify and prosecute all those involved in this activity.

The medicines being sold are potent and should only be taken under medical supervision. Criminals involved are exploiting people when they are at their most vulnerable; their only objective is to make money.

We will continue to concentrate our efforts on identifying the criminals involved and ensure they are prosecuted through the courts.

Victoria Atkins MP, Minister for Crime, Safeguarding and Vulnerability said:

I welcome this investigation by the MHRA, which shows there is no hiding place for criminals who try to sell prescription drugs illegally.

Drug misuse can cause untold harm and devastate lives and this Government will take whatever action is necessary to keep our families and communities safe.

Our Drug Strategy sets out a balanced approach which brings together police, health, community and global partners to tackle the illicit drug trade, protect the most vulnerable and help those with a drug dependency to recover and turn their lives around.

Duncan Rudkin, Chief Executive of General Pharmaceutical Council:

We are working closely with the MHRA on the ongoing investigations into these very serious criminal offences. We have already taken action to suspend five pharmacists under interim orders and are actively reviewing at each stage of the investigations whether we need to take further action to protect the public.

We would also strongly urge people not to take any prescription medicines unless they have a valid prescription, as they could be putting their health at serious risk.

People wishing to report criminal activity relating to the diversion of these medicines should report this to us to our case referrals email address: CaseReferrals@mhra.gov.uk. You may also provide information anonymously through [Crimestoppers](#)