

Woman arrested for suspected illegal sale of topical whitening product with undeclared drug ingredient (with photo)

The Department of Health (DH) today (September 3) conducted an operation against the sale of a topical whitening cream, namely 88 Total White Underarm Cream, which was found to contain an undeclared controlled ingredient. During the operation, a 37-year-old woman was arrested by the Police for suspected illegal sale of unregistered pharmaceutical product and Part 1 poison.

During the DH's market surveillance, a sample of the above product was purchased via an online platform for analysis. Test results from the Government Laboratory revealed that the sample contained betamethasone valerate, which is a Part 1 poison under the Pharmacy and Poisons Ordinance (Cap. 138). The product is also suspected to be an unregistered pharmaceutical product. The DH's investigation is ongoing.

Betamethasone valerate is a steroid substance for treating inflammation. Inappropriate application of steroids could cause skin problems and systemic side effects such as moon face, high blood pressure, high blood sugar, skin atrophy, adrenal insufficiency and osteoporosis. Products containing betamethasone valerate are prescription medicines that should be used under a doctor's directions and supplied in a pharmacy under the supervision of a registered pharmacist upon a doctor's prescription.

According to the Ordinance, all pharmaceutical products must be registered with the Pharmacy and Poisons Board of Hong Kong before they can be sold in the market. Illegal sale or possession of unregistered pharmaceutical products or Part 1 poisons is a criminal offence. The maximum penalty for each offence is a fine of \$100,000 and two years' imprisonment.

The DH spokesman strongly urged members of the public not to buy or use products of doubtful composition or from unknown sources. All registered pharmaceutical products should carry a Hong Kong registration number on the package in the format of "HK-XXXXX". The safety, quality and efficacy of unregistered pharmaceutical products are not guaranteed.

People who have purchased the product concerned should stop using it immediately and consult healthcare professionals if in doubt or feeling unwell after use. They may submit the product to the Drug Office of the DH at Room 1804-06, 18/F, Wing On Kowloon Centre, 345 Nathan Road, Kowloon, during office hours for disposal.

