



Internet Prescribing and the Physician Patient Relationship

Jeannine Jeha and Robert S. Crausman MD

In 1997, a young pharmacist who had gone on to medical school graduated from Jefferson Medical College in Philadelphia, PA. In 2000, he was licensed to practice medicine in the state of Rhode Island; in 2001 he earned Board Certification in Emergency Medicine. Several years later, he entered into an agreement with Rx Partners, an Internet pharmacy that employed physicians to approve prescriptions for patients who completed online questionnaires along with their medication requests via a website, conveniently named Speedyrxdrugs.com. Rx Partners would then fill the prescription and mail it to the patient. Available medications included several controlled substances.

In 2007 a complaint was filed with the RI Board of Medical Licensure and Discipline. After an investigation, it was determined that this Internet prescribing violated the provisions of Rhode Island General Law 5-37 and constituted unprofessional conduct in the practice of medicine. The physician was sanctioned with a formal Reprimand and required to complete a Board approved personalized ethics curriculum.

This was not the first Rhode Island physician to be sanctioned for illegitimate Internet prescribing. In 2001 another more senior physician had been sanctioned with 3 years Probation.

Illicit online prescribing is not a problem unique to our State. It is an international problem that has grown exponentially with the Internet. "Rogue" online pharmacies operate through websites and provide customers with prescription medications. Prescriptions are written or approved by licensed physicians based upon perfunctory online questionnaires completed by so-called patients. Safeguards intrinsic to the physician-patient relationship are nonexistent. There have been numerous documented instances of patient harm, including death.

Unfortunately, the lure of easy money coupled with the increasing demands of medical practice has attracted physicians nationwide. Physicians are generally paid between \$2 and \$50 per prescription. For example, one physician was paid approximately \$250,000 over a 7-month period before having to surrender his medical license to the Texas Medical Board. This physician was also sentenced to 3 years in federal prison for his role in the medication-related death of an 18-year-old man.

According to the Federation of State Medical Boards more than 150 physicians were disciplined nationally between 1999 and 2006 for unprofessional conduct relating to Internet pre-

scribing. The FSMB through its clearinghouse on Internet prescribing conducts investigations by purchasing prescription medications online. Since 2000 more than 90% of submitted online questionnaires have been approved despite containing fictitious information or physical data that would contraindicate prescription. There are approximately 1400 rogue pharmacy websites with many selling controlled substances.

Advancing Internet technology has revolutionized many aspects of medical practice through legitimate telemedicine. However, with regard to Internet prescribing this technology has advanced well ahead of effective regulation by State and Federal authorities.

To guide practicing physicians the Board articulated a position statement on Internet prescribing and the physician-patient relationship in 2007. "It is inappropriate to prescribe medications via the Internet or similar venue without an appropriate physician/patient relationship that would typically include: 1) patient history, 2) physical and/or mental health assessment, 3) legitimate records kept, 4) licensed and trained practitioners, 5) elements of informed consent wherever appropriate and reasonable, and 6) AMA/AOA code of ethics followed."

REFERENCES

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Robert S. Crausman, MD, MMS, is Chief Administrative Officer, RI Board of Medical Licensure and Discipline.

Jeannine Jeha, a student at Northeastern University, was an intern at the RI Department of Health.

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The authors have no financial interests to disclose.

CORRESPONDENCE:

Robert S. Crausman, MD, MMS
Chief Administrative Officer
RI Board of Medical Licensure and Discipline
3 Capitol Hill #205
Providence RI 02908
Phone: (401) 222-7888
e-mail: RSCrausman@aol.com