World Health Organization

TENTH MEETING OF THE MEMBER STATE MECHANISM ON SUBSTANDARD AND FALSIFIED MEDICAL PRODUCTS
Provisional agenda item 4(H)

A/MSM/10/9
4 October 2021

Identify experiences, best practices and/or regulation of the distribution or supply of medical products via the internet to prevent and reduce the risk of substandard and falsified medical products reaching consumers

Executive summary

1. This report responds to the request from the Member State mechanism on substandard and falsified medical products set out in prioritized activity H[1] to identify and develop appropriate strategies to understand and address the distribution or supply of substandard and falsified medical products via the internet. Against this background, the working group on activity H led by Colombia prepared a questionnaire to establish the views of the Member States on the distribution or supply of medical products via the internet. The questionnaire sought to ascertain the preparedness of Member States to prevent or reduce the risk of substandard and falsified medical products reaching consumers via internet distribution or supply, including online pharmacies.

2. Since June 2020, there has been an overall improvement reported by Member States in their preparedness to address this matter through regulations and other measures. The responses to the questionnaire illustrate that some regions and Member States still require more time to put in place adequate measures to combat the distribution or supply of substandard and falsified medical products via the internet, while others are much more advanced in tackling the issue. Such varying levels of progress were similarly noted both within and between regions.

3. As not all Member States responded to the questionnaire, this report may apply in a more general way to some States. For those Member States and their respective regions who did participate in the survey, the report contains indicators designed to support national and regional preparedness by focusing on past experiences, best practices and regulation. Similarly, the report provides the Member State mechanism with indicators for improvement on a global basis that will support both regional and Member State efforts to develop regulation and best practice in this area. It also provides the Member State mechanism with a basis for devising guidance on how to formulate strategies to prevent or reduce the risk of substandard and falsified medical products reaching consumers via the internet.

4. It should be noted that in respect of substandard and falsified medical products, the remit of WHO is to protect public health. While other intergovernmental organizations may have different responsibilities, all share the same objective of preventing the risk of harm to consumers from such medical products. The responses to the questionnaire illustrate the importance that Member States place

[1] Document A/MSM/8/4.

on their respective national medicines regulatory authorities engaging in intranational and international cooperation across all sectors, including both public and private stakeholders as well as internet service providers, social media networks and e-commerce platforms. The report highlights some common and recurring concerns, in particular a low level of cooperation by internet service providers and telecommunications companies. As such cooperation is essential to any holistic strategy aimed at combating substandard and falsified medical products distributed or supplied online, it is important for the Member State mechanism to agree on appropriate guidance to Member States. It is apparent that national medicines regulatory authorities also enlist the support of other intergovernmental organizations to assist in their investigation of and response to the online supply of substandard and falsified medical products. This provides a good indication of the need for greater cooperation between the relevant intergovernmental organizations involved in taking action against the online distribution or supply of substandard and falsified medical products.

5. The role of public awareness to prevent or reduce the risks associated with the online supply of substandard and falsified medical products was an area of concern covered by the survey. WHO and the Member State mechanism have already issued documentation and materials to support Member States in organizing public awareness-raising campaigns. The responses to the questionnaire indicate that while action has been taken at the national level, greater efforts are needed to launch awareness campaigns in conjunction with other Member States at the regional level so as to respond to the international aspect of the online supply of medical products, including substandard and falsified medical products.

6. The responses received to the final section of the questionnaire indicate that over half of the Member States have observed an increase in the online supply of substandard and falsified medical products since the start of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic. An almost equal number were of the view that they had experienced difficulties in effectively controlling the online supply of medical products during that same period.

7. The survey report is divided into several sections. The general report section of the document outlines the cross-cutting issues that were reported by a number of Member States and provides recommendations and conclusions to those concerns. The subsequent regional report section contains Member State observations on the topics covered in the questionnaire.

8. The full survey report as well as the guidance document on strategies are available via the MedNet platform.[1]

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[1] https://mednet-communities.net/sf/library (accessed 23 September 2021).