ELECTRONIC TRADING WITH DRUGS – TRENDS AND ASPECTS. SURVEY AMONG PHARMACISTS.

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ABSTRACT

The introduction of a uniform integrated information system through the development of electronic healthcare, aimed to achieve full transparency and efficient use of the available resources is one of the eight priority areas of the National Health Strategy 2014 – 2020. The building of a modern healthcare system based on the use of information and communication technologies requires a regulatory framework, which is capable of guaranteeing the rights and interests of the citizens and the other actors participating in the healthcare system. Currently, the electronic trading of drugs is permitted only for Non-prescription (Over The Counter) drugs, food additives and medical products, only for pharmacies and drugstores that hold the respective permit issued by the Bulgarian Drug Agency (BDA). The BDA webpage displays a list of entities who offer medical products for online trading. The online trading with drugs was officially launched in the beginning of 2012, when a number of pharmacies that maintained their own web pages obtained the right to sell non-prescription drugs via the Internet.

KEYWORDS: Internet trading, pharmacists, National Health Strategy, BDA.

INTRODUCTION

According to calculations provided by representatives of the pharmaceutical industry, there are approximately 3800 functioning pharmacies in the territory of Bulgaria. The Public Register of Pharmacies, which is uploaded on the web page of the Bulgarian Drug Agency...
BDA enlisted 4185 pharmacies for the period 4.09.1995 to 6.01.2014. But since the pharmacies are not obliged to notify BDA if they discontinue their activity, this number is not fully reliable.[6]

Objective: The objective of this article is to research the opinion of pharmacists working in pharmacies in the city of Varna on the aspects of electronic trading with OTC drugs, food additives and medical products.

Methods and materials: We conducted a direct anonymous survey among pharmacists working in the territory of Varna, with the purpose of obtaining their opinion on the benefits and risks associated with online trading.

Results: Pharmacists' concerns are related to the offering of false products on the Web on the one hand; on the other hand they are concerned with the lack of patient/pharmacist communication, which brings forth the issue of patient safety. The respondents share similar opinions where the social benefits of the electronic trading are concerned: easy access for disabled persons and easier deliveries to distant and hard-to-access areas.

An analysis from the Bulgarian Pharmaceutical Union shows that, out of the total number of pharmacies, 95% provide services to the population (open pharmacies); 3% function at medical institutions (hospital pharmacies); 2% are pharmacies for service-providing for the population without the right to distribute prescription drugs (pharmacies managed by assistant-pharmacists). 2198 (60%) of the pharmacies have contracts with the National Social Security Institute, 1455 (40%) of the pharmacies do not provide pharmaceutical products that are fully or partially paid by the National Social Security Institute.

The data for the local distribution of the pharmacy network show that 69% of the pharmacies that have contracts with the National Social Security Institute are situated in the 28 district centres of the country (i.e. the country’s major cities), 24% are situated in other towns and only 7% of all pharmacies are situated in villages. The above data showing the uneven distribution of pharmacies throughout the country, illustrate the painful problem concerning the patients’ access to medications and medical treatment, which is a major goal identified in the drug policy and falls in contradiction with the principles embedded in the National Health Strategy and with the rules for GPhP and GDP.
Bulgaria still occupies the bottom position among the EU Member States (according to EUROSTAT) by the rate of online sales, but statistics show that in 2013 the number of Bulgarians who made online purchases increased to 683 thousand people. This figure accounts for a growth of nearly 100% compared to 2011, when the Internet shoppers were approximately 360 thousand. Similar statistics clearly outline the trends in the development of the sector while the larger use of solutions for online shops such as Gombashop points at the desire of the small and medium-size businesses to position themselves in the virtual space.\textsuperscript{[8]}

According to the American statistics, the use of the Internet for the obtaining of health information is amongst the most popular online activities in the USA. The average American sees the doctor thrice a year but spends 52 hours per year on the Internet.\textsuperscript{[2]} These facts illustrate the importance of the Internet in the users’ daily lives. This importance will continue to grow and create a new generation of patients.

According to data from the National Statistic Institute (NSI) concerning the use of Internet in Bulgaria, the age group of 16 – 44 years old is the most represented; these are predominantly young people in working age. The new patient’s profile which takes shape with the continuous Internet development in Bulgaria can be summed up as: employed urban female educated above the average.\textsuperscript{[5]}

The majority of EU Member States permit online trading with OTC drugs. This activity is allowed for pharmacies which have obtained the respective permit from the competent national authority. (For Bulgaria this is the Bulgarian Drug Agency.) Within the frame of the EU, only an insignificant share of the total amount of drugs reaches the patients through non-pharmacy channels.

In Bulgaria the online trading with drugs has been officially permitted since 06.01. 2012 and has been regulated with changes introduced in Regulation No. 28 for the structure, order and organization of work in the pharmacies.

There are 29 pharmacies in Bulgaria licensed for online trading with drugs and the traders’ list is uploaded on the BDA webpage.
Fig. 1. Regional distribution of the legal entities licensed for OTC online trading.

Fig. 1 shows that the largest number of registered pharmacies is in the South-Western region 14 followed by the South-Eastern region 8; the least number of pharmacies is in the North-Eastern and the North-Central region, which has a single registered pharmacy.

“OTC online trading can be conducted by persons who are licensed for retail trading of drugs or hold certificate for the registration of drugstore under the provisions of the Act on Medicinal Products in Human Medicine, this Regulation and, respectively, Art. 243 of the Act on Medicinal Products in Human Medicine.

The development of a Web page is not a standalone investment; is requires a number of associated investments, too. Like, for example, pharmacy owners should foresee investments in proper packing, transportation and delivery of the drugs, if they are to preserve the quality of drugs and prove the efficacy of the online trading.[4]

This situation raises the question of investment profitability: how many patients would resort to the services of the online trading since OTC, vitamins and food additives can be found in drugstores and “healthy food” shops?

By the index “average number of residents serviced by one pharmacy,” Bulgaria lags significantly behind the average European levels. Only one EU Member State – Greece has a smaller number of residents serviced by one pharmacy.[4]

In May 2015, we conducted a survey among patients/clients of pharmacies in the territory of Varna, which established that only 14.28% of the respondents had purchased OTC and food additives via the Internet.
The practice of online purchasing of drugs triggers a number of problems concerning customer protection. In this connection, a Falsified Medicines Directive has been adopted, its purpose being to assure greater safety at the legal offering of drugs via the Internet, providing in particular an opportunity for the development of a European logo for trust in the legal web pages within the Digital Technology Programme.[1]

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION
We conducted a survey among pharmacists from 27 pharmacies in the city of Varna. The average respondent age was 39.4 years; their average length of employment experience was 11.7 years. The questionnaire had 8 positions, one of which was an opened question and four of the questions allowed for more than one answer.

All respondents answered affirmatively to the question “Is the online trading potentially hazardous for patients’ health?” Pharmacists’ concerns are related to the offering of false products on the Web and the lack of opportunity for patient/pharmacist communication.

It should be stressed that the pharmacist’s role is not only logistic, i.e. the pharmacist is not there to only hand in a medication to a patient. The dispensing of drugs is a professional activity where pharmacists supplement the prescribed drug therapy with information about the drug, such as side effects, unwanted reactions, pharmacological action, intake instructions, and to conduct checkups on the drug-drug and drug-patient interaction. This comprehensive role is important for the optimised benefits for the patient from the treatment.[4]

It has been established that the visits to the pharmacy are twice more frequent than the visits to the doctor. This circumstance establishes the pharmacist as the most frequently visited medical specialist and places the pharmacy in a unique position where the providing of support for the patient and assistance for the improvement of the public health are concerned.[4]

The following graph presents a summary of pharmacists’ opinions concerning the most frequent health risks, to which online drug buyers are exposed: the negative aspects of online trading according to the pharmacists.
Fig. (2). Drawbacks of the online purchasing of drugs

Fig. 2 shows that the prevalent aspect, again, is the lack of communication between the pharmacist and the patient/client, which results in irrational drug use. Mistakes in the taking of drugs are, according to pharmacists, the second major aspect resulting from the offering of products that have the same active ingredient but different trade names (polypragmasia). The respondents assess as equally significant the higher risk from the entry of false medications and the providing of misleading information concerning the potential of the products. The lower control has been given the lowest position in respondents’ questionnaires.

In order to assure adequate protection for the patients throughout the EU, it is reasonable to continuously analyze the possible specific risks related to the online drug trading in connection with the applying of the Falsified Medicines Directive by the Member States.

The illegal offering of drugs can constitute a punishable crime under the Council of Europe’s Medicrime Convention.

The Member States are invited to enhance their cooperation in the area of penal persecution in the combat of falsified drugs; a plan will be launched for the detection of illegal Web pages offering drugs.[1]

The respondents ranked in the following way the benefits and advantages of online trading:
The respondents are unanimous about the social advantages of the online trading such as easy access for disabled persons and possibility for deliveries to remote and hard-to-access areas. Pharmacies are few or missing in the medium-size and small places; the larger number of pharmacies are clustered in the larger cities. In the presence of contract with a drug supplier or manufacturer who imports certain medications, the online pharmacy can supply drugs that are seldom offered in the large network of “real” pharmacies.

Time saving and speedy delivery are the next major aspects; users can purchase the products they need from their homes and then, under standard circumstances, the delivery will be accomplished within the next 24 hours with an option for speedier delivery.

Price competitiveness has been given the bottom position by the respondents. As a rule, online pharmacies keep lower prices. The prices are formed according to the standard price-formation procedure foreseen in the regulatory framework for the online trading.

The pharmacists point at the lower control where online trading is concerned and give recommendations that the nomenclature of offered drugs should be reduced, the criteria for the issuing of online trading licenses should be raised and observed, and the number of controlling organizations should be increased.

CONCLUSION
The introducing of electronic healthcare in Bulgaria as a priority of the National Health Strategy 2014 – 2020 and the continuous development of the information technologies determine the growing popularity of the online trading with drugs. The possibility to buy medicinal products through the Global Network will solve one problem concerning the
inequality of patients’ access to healthcare in areas that have no pharmacies – the process of drug supplying will be facilitated for the sick and incapacitated patients and the general users will save time. The national executive authorities and competent bodies should exercise stricter control aimed to prevent the risk of Internet cheating, falsified medications, misleading information and advertising and in order to provide for the patients’ safety and effective treatment with online-purchased medicinal products.

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