

# Real Danger campaign - is it a balanced healthcare message?

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Tuesday, 15 May 2012

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The Real Danger campaign and website (<http://www.realdanger.co.uk>) sponsored by the makers of Viagra, Pfizer, rightly attempts to dissuade patients from sourcing medicines online from potentially dangerous and illegal websites.

It is a well-funded and well-publicised campaign, partnered by major organisations in UK healthcare, and often features in mainstream media.

As a public health and awareness message however, it is only partially helpful – and fails to adequately address the main issue.

The British public are using the internet in their hundreds of thousands every year determined to buy prescription medicine online – the vast majority will not have a paper prescription from their doctor (or other healthcare professional).

One of the 'real dangers' in healthcare is a failure to give balanced advice. The balanced advice in the case of obtaining medicine online is that care needs to be taken, but that patients should not be put off from going online when this can be an effective way to improve their wellbeing.

A balanced healthcare message should provide clear guidance on how to do this safely, and remove the guesswork for the public who resort to search engines to provide the answers. Search engines do not vet their results, and the results can be manipulated.

The Real Danger campaign could serve the public better by providing a list of websites providing online prescriptions and genuine medicine from regulated services. The Real Danger website could be the go-to resource for the medicine-buying public.

From [www.realdanger.co.uk/get-it-right](http://www.realdanger.co.uk/get-it-right):

"Buying medicines from websites that are not part of registered pharmacies can present a number of risks."

Registered pharmacies are only part of the process of obtaining prescription-only medicine – a patient must first obtain a prescription from a doctor (or other healthcare professional). A legal and valid prescription can be obtained online from a regulated online doctor/clinic service registered with the Care Quality Commission.

Many online doctor services partner with pharmacies to provide the full end-to-end service. A registered pharmacy that is not partnered with an online doctor service can only supply prescription medicine if patients post a paper prescription issued by their doctor.

Unfortunately the Real Danger campaign and website focuses as much on scare as on information, and makes little mention of the many regulated UK online doctor/clinics providing good advice and supplying safe

medicine from regulated pharmacies. There is a lack of proper balance in the healthcare message of the campaign's website.

People are sourcing more and more services online, from holidays to utility supplies, and medicine is no different. In response to demand for convenient safe medical services the UK has developed a pioneering system for regulating online clinics.

The Care Quality Commission registers online clinics. General Medical Council (GMC) registered doctors carry out the consultations. Accurate medical information is provided and prescriptions are issued. Medicine is posted out from General Pharmaceutical Council (GPhC) registered pharmacies. The registrations of these services can be checked and verified online at the regulatory agencies websites.

Online electronic private prescriptions, sent directly to regulated UK pharmacies, are used routinely in the UK. Not everyone who is seeking prescription medicine from an online pharmacy will have a prescription to post from their GP. The role of online clinics is to assess patients and provide a complete package of care for a restricted number of medical conditions, prescription included.

Most of the websites which appear at the top of Google listings for search terms involving drug names in the UK will yield results of regulated pharmacies or regulated online clinics.

The Real Danger website mentions that GPs are an established source of assessment and advice, which is true. However the site omits to emphasise that hundreds of thousands of online consultations with doctors take place every year, and that for a restricted range of medicines, this is a safe and effective way of delivering healthcare for common conditions.

Patients use online clinics for a reason. They are generally convenient, avoid embarrassment, and can be low cost. Many of the medicines sourced online are not available to patients via their GPs, particularly medication to treat male impotence and travel medicine such as the malaria tablet, Malarone.

Patients looking for low cost healthcare need to be encouraged to seek that care safely, not be frightened off altogether. Positive health messages are useful. The message should be: 'you can obtain medicine safely online, as many people already do, and this is how'.

To be fair to the Real Danger website and the campaign there is mention of Care Quality Commission (CQC) regulated services on the Get it Right (<http://www.realdanger.co.uk/get-it-right>) page, but this is perhaps too little, when patients in their thousands are voting with their cursors and already sourcing their medicine online.

Full story: <http://www.doctorfox.co.uk/news/real-danger/>

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