

Statement on Telehealth and Supply of Pharmacy Services over the Internet

Introduction

- Under section 118(i) of the Health Practitioners Competence Assurance Act 2003, the Pharmacy Council has the authority and obligation “to set standards of clinical competence, cultural competence, and ethical conduct to be observed by health practitioners of the profession”.
- The Pharmacy Council wishes to provide pharmacists with clear expectations of standards for Telehealth and Supply of medicines over the internet. The intent is that this document informs and guides the professional judgement of pharmacists.
- This statement should be read in conjunction with other general and pharmacy specific legislation, statements, and guidelines that provide guidance on this topic. Pharmacists are expected to exhibit behaviour that reflects their professional standing and maintains the public’s trust in the pharmacy profession.
- Although the use of technology has the potential to provide benefits to society by facilitating the appropriate and timely access to medicines and pharmacy services, it also carries risks that must be mitigated.
- This statement may be used by any relevant organisation, including the Health Practitioners Disciplinary Tribunal, the Pharmacy Council, the Ministry of Health, and the Health and Disability Commissioner as a standard by which a pharmacist’s conduct is measured and sanctions imposed.

Definitions

- For the purposes of this statement, telehealth is defined as: “the use of information and communication technologies to deliver health care when patients and care providers are not in the same physical location”.
- Face-to-face means where the pharmacist and patient are physically present in the same physical location.
- Responsible pharmacist means a pharmacist who has effective control of the pharmacy and its services, and is named on the license

Scope

- This statement applies to all communications, services and supplies that occur when patients and pharmacy care providers are not in the same physical location.
- It also includes communication to other health professional with regards to common patients

Pharmacist Responsibilities

- All pharmacists are responsible for ensuring that their own practice and the practice within their workplace complies with legislative, ethical and professional standards.
- The responsible pharmacist as named on the pharmacy licence, has overall responsibility for ensuring that all activities (including that of any internet sites or electronic communications) comply with legislative, ethical and professional standards.
- Should a pharmacist become aware of any non-compliance relating to the above activities, they must take immediate action to modify the material and /or processes so that it complies with relevant standards

General Principles

- Any workspace, device, software or service used by the pharmacist for the purposes of telehealth and internet supply must be secure, private and fit for purpose.
- Pharmacists must ensure that continuity of care is maintained irrespective of the mode of healthcare delivery.
- The patient must provide informed consent to receive healthcare in the manner proposed and care and safety must not be compromised by the mode of delivery.
- Whilst a face-to-face consultation remains best practice, particularly where patient assessment is required, information and communication technology facilitated consultations may also be appropriate and improve patient access to health professionals.
- The standard of advice and service available via telehealth or the internet should be of the same level to that which would be received by a patient consulting directly with the pharmacist.
- Pharmacists must be aware of the limitations of telehealth and internet supply (e.g. Difficulty in ensuring patient identity, low resolution of images or sound) and ensure patient safety is not compromised. If a pharmacist is unable to provide a service to the same standard as a face-to-face consultation, the pharmacist must make this clear to the patient and discuss alternative options.
- Where records must be kept for face-to-face consultations and supply of medicines, such records must also be kept for Telehealth and internet supply.

Supply of Medicines over the Internet

- Pharmacists must comply with all the legal and ethical requirements when supplying and/or dispensing medicines over the internet.
- Pharmacists may only supply medicines from a licensed pharmacy premises (Medicines Act section 18). The same laws apply for a pharmacy internet site as for a pharmacy premises. The website must prominently display the proper name, physical address and all other essential contact details for the pharmacy, including the name of the charge pharmacist .

- Pharmacists must ensure they have sufficient information to assess the patient's needs and must also satisfy themselves of the clinical appropriateness of supply.

Internet sales of over-the-counter (OTC) medicines

- Assessing the suitability of the medicine for the intended user will necessitate a conversation with the individual or the individual's caregiver and/or a questionnaire to be completed. In addition, counselling and advice should be provided verbally and/or in writing and an invitation to use a free-phone telephone number for further information could be appropriate.
- Medicines of potential abuse, misuse and dependence (e.g. sedating antihistamines, cyclizine) should not be available for sale via the internet because of the difficulty in ascertaining whether the purchaser is genuine and because of the difficulty of monitoring sales. Best practice requires a face-to-face consultation to provide these medicines appropriately whenever possible.
- It is inappropriate to supply Pharmacist Only (Restricted) Medicines for chronic supply over the internet, outside of New Zealand, for example sildenafil, since the ability to conduct patient assessment and monitoring is lost.

Provision of prescription medicines over the internet

- It is illegal for patients to be in possession of a prescription medicine unless it has been prescribed for them by a New Zealand registered prescriber. For this reason, requests for supply of prescription medicines on prescriptions written by non-NZ prescribers must be declined.
- Currently faxed, telephoned prescriptions or prescriptions sent through the electronic prescribing service (NZePS) are the only legal options to dispense prescription medicines without an original prescription. Email prescriptions are currently not recognised as legal.

Related resources

- Medicines Act 1981
- Misuse of drugs Act 1975
- Misuse of Drugs Regulation 2006
- Competence standards for the Pharmacy Profession
- Code of Ethics
- Health and Disability Commissioner Act 1994
- Code of Health and Disability Services Consumers' Rights.
- Social Media and the Pharmacy Profession (November 2012)
- Advertising Statement
- Health Information Privacy Code 1994
- Protocol for the Sale and Supply of Pharmacist only Medicines in Chronic Conditions.