

Chemists warn of discount-driven fake medicines

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Calcutta: Bengal's medicine market is increasingly being flooded with spurious drugs, and the competition among traders to offer steeper discounts is making the entry of cheaper counterfeit medicines easier, the state's largest association of chemists and druggists said on Tuesday.

A section of chemists and distributors observed a 12-hour strike from midnight on Tuesday to protest the circulation

of fake medicines and the alleged rise of illegal online e-pharmacies.

The Bengal Chemists and Druggists Association (BCDA) urged customers to insist on cash memos and check batch numbers while purchasing medicines.

"Retailers are allowed discounts of 16 to 20% according to market norms, depending on the medicines. How can some traders offer much higher discounts? Where is the margin coming from? It is anyone's guess," said Prithwi Bose, general secretary of the BCDA.

"We urge buyers to check batch dates and insist on cash memos so the source of the medicines can be traced."

A batch refers to a fixed quantity of medicine produced during a single manufacturing cycle. Each batch carries a number along with production date and formulation, allowing tracking for quality and safety.

Wholesalers and distributors said pharmaceutical companies route medicines through clearing and forwarding agents authorised for individual states. These agents then supply registered distributors, who in turn provide medicines to retailers. Every stage is documented through invoices.

"After fair-price medicine shops started functioning, a section of retailers entered into an unethical discount war and began

searching for avenues to offer bigger discounts than those shops," said Sankha Roy Chowdhury, a member of the BCDA.

Wholesalers alleged that in the rush to undercut competitors, some retailers stopped verifying whether distributors possessed valid licences or whether the medicines being

offered at unusually low prices were genuine.

"We also want to sell medicines at lower prices. But not through unethical practices, which

unfortunately some traders have adopted," Bose said.

Doctors at state-run medical colleges and hospitals have also flagged concerns over fake medicines finding their way into hospital pharmacies.

Industry members alleged that checks needed to regulate the supply chain had weakened, enabling rackets involving traders and some health administrators to thrive.

"The sole concern right now is that if one shop is offering a 20% discount on medicines, another wants to offer even more," Bose said.

In February, officials of the state directorate of drug control seized suspected spurious medicines worth nearly ₹17 lakh during a raid at a godown in Amta, Howrah. Officials said fake QR codes of reputed pharmaceutical companies had been pasted on foils to deceive buyers into believing they were purchasing genuine medicines.

Industry officials feared counterfeit medicines worth nearly ₹1 crore may already have entered retail markets across Bengal.

"We do not have the infrastructure or personnel to determine whether medicines are fake. Only lab tests can establish that," said Prodyot Banerjee, president, BCDA. "So our appeal is — insist on cash memos and check the batch numbers of medicines before buying them."

