

## Warning over online trade in sex hormones

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Transsexuals are risking serious health problems - including fatal blood clots and liver damage - by buying sex change hormones via online pharmacies without the knowledge of their doctor, SocietyGuardian.co.uk has learned.

Several members of the UK transgender community said there was a black market in female, and to a lesser extent male, hormones, with growing numbers of pre-op transsexuals buying the drugs online.

Some transsexuals claim they are forced to obtain the drugs illegally due to the limited number of NHS clinics providing gender identity disorder services.

Male-to-female transsexuals are purchasing oestrogen tablets, which are often marketed as hormone replacement therapy for menopausal women, from internet pharmacies across the world.

One US transsexual website provides a guide to online pharmacies in the UK, the USA, Pakistan and Thailand which sell female hormones, recommending those which offer the best and cheapest service.

Posters on several UK online transsexual message boards swap the web addresses of the pharmacies and recommend them to new members.

Claire McNabb, vice-president of the transgender lobby group Press for Change, said she was aware of the black market.

She said: "I know numbers of folks buying hormones off the internet. I will never actually try to discourage them, but ask them to weigh up the benefits of getting proper medical monitoring against the damage of waiting to get treatment on the NHS."

Ms McNabb said that many people waiting for treatment suffered severe depression because of their unease with their physical gender and found that taking hormones greatly relieved their anxiety and discomfort.

One transsexual, who asked not to be named, said: "I bought hormones off the internet for two to three months last year because I'd seen psychiatrists but wasn't happy with the way I was treated.

"I bought a batch of Prognova. It's £60 for a three-month supply."

"I don't like the online pharmacies. They're trying to exploit people and there's often a 25% mark-up on the drugs compared to the cost of a private prescription. But if you've got gender dysphoria it can be very frustrating and can drive you to do dumb things."

Kevan Wylie, chairman of the Royal College of Psychiatrists' working party on gender identity disorder, said patients who took oestrogen without medical supervision could experience a pulmonary embolism, whereby a blood clot travels to the lungs and blocks an artery.

He said: "If a patient is taking hormones without medical supervision, or supplementing a prescription with drugs obtained illegally, their blood is at risk of thickening, which could lead to deep vein thrombosis [DVT].

"There are a few reports of patients getting DVT and then developing a fatal embolism. This is incredibly rare, but it's a risk."

Dr Wylie, who works at three hospitals in Sheffield, said taking female hormones without precautions also posed a risk of liver damage. He said his patients had their blood count carefully monitored by a haematologist. The consultant psychiatrist said that the hormones black market was the result of patients' unrealistic expectations about the drugs' effects.

He said some male patients expected the hormones to transform them into "stereotypical" busty women.

"People expect an overnight reaction to the hormones. But that's unrealistic, girls don't develop breasts overnight but over around 18 months," said Dr Wylie.

"Some people will never acquire largest breast tissue. Not everyone is going to become a stereotype. And taking extra hormones won't make any difference."

The psychiatrist suggested that some male-to-female transsexuals became impatient because they saw more rapid changes in the physical appearance of female-to-male patients.

"Women will become transmen more quickly because testosterone produces almost immediate changes such as facial hair growth," he explained.

Dr Wylie said psychiatrists should make it clear to patients that they should not expect the drugs to produce an overnight transformation.

"You have to counsel people so they don't have false expectations," he said.

"But these people are adults and they have a responsibility to look after their own health."