

ONLINE PHARMACIES

Counterfeit drugs caused woman's death, coroner concludes

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JULY 6, 2007

VANCOUVER -- Shoddy pills from a bogus online pharmacy are to blame for the death of a 58-year-old woman from Vancouver Island, a coroner's report says.

Yesterday's conclusion makes Marcia Bergeron the first clear-cut case of a death stemming from counterfeit drugs bought on the Internet, but it likely won't be the last, said Rose Stanton, regional coroner for Vancouver Island.

"The quantity of seized counterfeit medication is huge," she said. "And so, what we have is the first person [for whom] we have all the facts, who we know died as a result of these drugs.

"But what we also know is lots of people are buying these drugs. So the potential for more deaths is high."

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Ms. Bergeron was found by a friend on Dec. 28, 2006, in her bed in a normal sleeping position.

Emergency services were called, but it was clear she had been dead for some time.

Three types of pills were found at Ms. Bergeron's home. One contained Zolpidem, a powerful hypnotic not available in Canada. Another contained the anti-anxiety medication Alprazolam, which is available with a prescription, and the third contained acetaminophen.

These drugs were later determined to be laced with extremely high quantities of metal. The acetaminophen pill had 15 times the amount of aluminum that would be fatal, Ms. Stanton said.

An autopsy showed that Ms. Bergeron died of cardiac arrhythmia stemming from metal toxicity.

In the weeks and months leading up to her death, she complained of flu-like symptoms. Ms. Bergeron said, in e-mails to a friend, that her hair was falling out, and she suffered from nausea, diarrhea, aching joints and blurry vision.

When the pills were tested, they were of such poor quality, the ingredients seemed "mashed together" Ms. Stanton said. The mixture of drugs and metal in each pill would vary depending on which portion was examined, she said.

The metal contaminants were likely part of the filler materials used to make the pills, the coroner's report said.

On Ms. Bergeron's computer, records showed she had been visiting websites from which medication could be purchased.

When U.S. Food and Drug Administration investigators examined her hard drive, it showed Ms. Bergeron bought Zolpidem - a powerful sedative available by prescription in the U.S. but not in Canada.

The website she used, which purported to be Canadian but has since gone offline, was previously flagged by the FDA concerning counterfeit Zolpidem.

Because of all these elements - computer records, e-mails, drugs found on scene and a subsequent autopsy - investigators were able to definitively link the online drugs to Ms. Bergeron's death.

It's an FDA first, Ms. Stanton said.

She said the website Ms. Bergeron used is one of thousands that claim to be reputable pharmacies.

"The site that she purchased from is one of a group of sites that the FDA says use the tactic of phoning people after they get the first order," she said. "They phone for the renewal so there isn't a computer record."

Marnie Mitchell, CEO of the B.C. Pharmacy Association said that Canada has a very regulated and monitored pharmacy system, and stepping away from it has risks.

"Online sources are very difficult to assess their legitimacy and their safety," she said. "This is a very tragic episode and illustration of the problems that stem from going to those kinds of places."

Cracking down on these websites, however, would be a difficult endeavour, she said, because they change and shift very quickly and are hard to trace.

Instead, she recommended the federal government launch a public-awareness campaign to warn people of the potential dangers.

Alain Desroches, spokesperson for Health Canada said the agency regularly flags counterfeit products and issues public advisories. It also works with RCMP in investigating counterfeit drugs. However, he could not comment on any policy changes that would stem from the coroner's findings.

"We welcome the report and it's going to be reviewed carefully," he said.

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