

Internet remedies for STIs pose significant public health hazard

November 19 2007

People with sexually transmitted infections are putting themselves at risk by buying treatments over the internet, according to new research by the University of East Anglia.

Less than a quarter of internet vendors gave information on potential side effects of their treatments. They also failed to say if their products would interfere with any prescription medicines that patients might be on, or if there might be harm to patients who were breastfeeding or pregnant. Equally, less than a quarter of vendors provided advice on how to avoid transmission and becoming re-infected.

This study was undertaken by Dr Roberto Vivancos, Dr Yoon Loke and Dr Silke Schelenz at UEA's School of Medicine, Health Policy and Practice. The results are published in the journal *Biomedcentral Public Health* this month.

The researchers found a total of 77 treatments from 52 different companies on the internet, including ebay. These remedies were aimed at conditions such as genital warts, herpes, gonorrhoea, and chlamydia. The average cost was around £50, with the most expensive being offered at £145.

Owing to the stigma associated with sexually transmitted infections, patients may prefer to hide their illness, and choose instead to try out internet remedies in the privacy of their own homes. However, such remedies may prove hazardous if the sellers do not provide detailed

advice on adverse effects, or on avoiding transmission and re-infection. If sexual partners are not treated at the same time, the treatment is bound to fail because the patient will be infected again and again. Patients can become unable to have children if gonorrhoea and chlamydia are not properly treated.

“It may be easy and convenient to buy your own treatment on the internet but we think that people are taking significant risks in doing so,” said Dr Roberto Vivancos.

“Treatment of sexually transmitted infections is not a simple one-off step of popping the pills or slapping on the creams. Some of these remedies will inevitably fail if sexual partners are not treated and if patients don’t take steps to avoid re-infection.”

The researchers also found that almost half of the products were claimed to be effective, but there was actually very little solid evidence from the vendors to back this up.

“Patients nowadays can easily buy kits from the internet to test themselves for sexually transmitted infections and they may be tempted to do the same when they need treatment,” said Dr Vivancos.

“But the NHS offers a professional, confidential treatment service that is likely to be far better and cheaper than taking chances on an unproven internet remedy.”

Source: University of East Anglia

Citation: Internet remedies for STIs pose significant public health hazard (2007, November 19) retrieved 18 April 2024 from

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