

Internet Pet Pharmacies: A Blessing or A Scourge?

Author: Dr. Kirk Dixon, DVM

INTERNET PET PHARMACIES:



A BLESSING OR A SCOURGE?

It happens thousands of times in our nation every day. A pet owner receives a package in the mail with pet medications in it. Or maybe they come home from the "big box" store with some flea medication they got at a "great" price. What benefit drove their action? Sometimes it is convenience, but most of the time it is to save money. The sad part is that in the long run, their total pet care costs are actually going to be more because of their apparent short-term savings. It is a simple math problem. The pharmacy accounts for 20-50 percent of the revenue for most veterinary practices. If veterinarians lose their pharmacies, one of two things will happen. Either all of the veterinarians will go out of business, which isn't going to happen, or they will make up the lost revenue by raising all of the other prices.

Veterinary medicine has been the best value in medicine because we get revenue from several sources: exams, surgeries, pharmacy, laboratory, vaccines, boarding

and bathing, etc. When you start shrinking the revenue sources with vaccine clinics, spay/neuter clinics and internet pharmacies, it is the consumer

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who suffers. Look how specialized human medicine is with every area provided by a different business. Has that model made health care more affordable? Absolutely not! Not only is it less affordable, but the individuals (not the corporations) are making so little, the best and the brightest no longer want to pursue that career path. Every MD I know tells his or her children to choose any path other than medicine. That is very sad.

Some may say that while there may not be savings, there will be greater efficiency

it has been documented that up to 22 percent of all prescriptions filled by a pharmacy are done incorrectly. When I am the one filling my own prescription and then personally discussing its usage with the client, the odds of an error drop precipitously.

In addition, the online pharmacies won't tell you this, but they cannot buy most of the medications they sell from the manufacturer or their authorized distributor. This is because the pharmaceutical companies only sell directly to veterinarians. Hence, they either get the medications from the gray market, which is veterinarians selling their inventory to them, or off the black market, which can include stolen and counterfeit drugs. About two years ago, customs intercepted an entire container of pet medications heading to an internet pharmacy. Upon investigation, they found out it had been stolen by Somali pirates. One of the largest online pharmacies has been fined tens to hundreds of thousands of dollars and placed on

probation by their state pharmacy board for violating many laws. It has been sued by its own shareholders for failing to disclose they can't buy all of their products directly and it has been banned from multiple states for predatory practices.

As a veterinarian, I have signed many non-diversion contracts promising I will not sell my product to anyone outside of the doctor's client/patient relationship. I have never assisted those agreements, but others sell large quantities unethically to the online pharmacies. Some of the pharmaceutical companies put tracking numbers and bar codes on their product and make purchases from the Internet. Then they track it back to individual veterinarian and cut them off from ever buying their products in the future.

There are many expectations from governing boards regarding exams, blood work and other monitoring with dispensed medications. I am always working my contacts to bring the price down for my clients so that many times there are no savings getting the drugs elsewhere. So the next time a friend or an advertisement tells you to buy online, think about the true cost of the purchase and get the best value for your money by going to your veterinarian. 🐾

Dr. Kirk Dixon is the founder and partner of Harbor Head Veterinary Services with locations on Martha's Vineyard, Nantucket Island, and Cape Cod. Dr. Kirk Dixon is a DVM, MS, and Diplomate in the American College of Veterinary Surgeons. For more information visit harborhead.com.

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Veterinary medicine has been the best value in medicine, because we get revenue from several sources: exams, surgeries, pharmacy, laboratory, vaccines, boarding, bathing, etc. When you start shrinking the revenue sources with vaccine clinics, spay neuter clinics and Internet pharmacies, it is the consumer who suffers. Look how specialized human medicine is with every area provided by a different business. Has that model made health care more affordable? Absolutely not! Not only is it less affordable, but the individuals (not the corporations) are making so little, the best and the brightest no longer want to pursue that career path. Every M.D. I know tells his or her children to choose any path other than medicine. That is very sad.

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Dr. Kirk Dixon is the founder and owner of Hilton Head Veterinary Clinics, with locations on Matthews Dr. on Hilton Head Island (843) 681-2890 and Okatie Village Dr. in Okatie (843) 705-9959. For more information, visit hiltonheadpet.com.