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Doctors' recommendations subject to guidelines

SECTIONS 4.1.3, 4.1.4, 4.5.1.2 and 4.5.2 of the Singapore Medical Council's (SMC) Ethical Code and Ethical Guidelines (ECEG) provide doctors with the relevant guidance with regard to the prescription of medicine, untested practices and clinical trials, relationships with non-medical companies and association with the promotion of vitamins, tonics, and health and nutrition supplements ("Isn't it advertising when docs recommend certain products?" by Mr Francis Cheng; Forum Online, Dec 23).

Doctors who dispense medicine out of their own clinics do so as a matter of convenience for their patients.

Their conduct in this regard is governed by the SMC's ECEG, which makes it plain that the medication prescribed ought to be generally accepted by the medical profession and should be dispensed only on clear medical grounds.

The sale of non-pharmaceutical health-related treatments such as vitamins, tonics, or health or nutrition supplements comes with a similar obligation to ensure that such products are clinically indicated, that there is sufficient scientific evidence of efficacy and safety, and that their use is generally accepted by the medical profession.

Provided doctors abide by this ethical principle, they may prescribe and dispense health supplements in their clinics.

However, unproven medicine or treatments cannot be prescribed except in the context of formal, approved clinical trials.

Doctors who promote non-medical or non-health related products or services of businesses unrelated to their practices (for example, spa services) must ensure that in doing so, their medical qualifications do not serve to mislead the public into thinking that such products or services are medically beneficial or are otherwise being endorsed by the doctor in question.

Under the Medicines Act, all advertisements and sales promotions of medicinal products, including most vitamins and mineral preparations, are subject to permit control and evaluation by the Health Sciences Authority (HSA).

Dealers of medicinal products are required to comply with the various requirements set out by HSA, such as the appropriateness in the conduct, mechanism and announcement of advertising and sales promotion activities.

In relation to whether there has been any contravention of the above regulations and guidelines, we invite Mr Cheng to contact moh_info@moh.gov.sg regarding the matter.

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