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PRESS RELEASE

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Market Practices used in Pharmaceutical Sector lacks accountability and transparency: Council

The Consumer Council of Fiji wants the Fiji Pharmaceutical Society to strengthen its code of ethics and monitor market practices in the industry. This is after Council's survey on the pharmaceutical industry in Fiji found a number of problems in the trade practices within the industry.

Some of these problems included pharmacies not disclosing prices of individual medicines, violation of labelling requirements for medicines set by the Ministry of Health, problems with receipts, not informing consumers on choice over generic and originator brand medications, dispensing medications in wrong dosage and being involved in fraudulent sale.

One of the key findings of the Council's pharmaceutical survey was that pharmacies in Fiji were not informing consumers on the choice they had in buying cheaper generic medications or more expensive originator brands. As a result of this consumers in Fiji are paying high prices for their medicines because of the lack of choice given over generics and patent or originator brand medicines. Most consumers are paying higher price for medications which could cost them much less if given the choice.

Our survey involved the use of a prescription of 7 medicines (*Amoxicillin, Enalapril, Simvastatin, Metformin, Fruesmid, Glipizide and Aspirin*) for an elderly male patient suffering from diabetes, cardiovascular ailments, high blood pressure and cholesterol. The prescription was dispensed by a doctor from public hospital. While not codified, the general accepted practice amongst the pharmacists is to dispense generic drugs when presented with a hospital prescription. This is because most of the poor and low-income earners go to public hospitals for treatment or to acquire prescription medicines. In addition to this, the Council expects that consumers' basic right to choice, irrespective of socio-economic status is respected and adhered to by pharmacists.

However, Council's survey results revealed that of the 47 pharmacies, 43 chose to dispense originator brands for one or more prescribed drugs without informing the consumer that he could opt for a cheaper generic brand of the same medicine either in their pharmacy or any other chemist. Hence, the total price of the medicine which should have cost the consumer **\$15.00** if given all generic medications, actually cost him up to **\$44.00**, which was **three times** more or **three months supply of his medication**. Of the 43 pharmacies that chose to dispense originator

brands instead of generics, **12** charged more than \$30.00 while **3** charged more than \$40.00 for the prescribed medicines.

Dispensing originator brands without informing the consumers of the choice between originator brands and generics seemed to be a common practice amongst pharmacies in Fiji. The Council questions why the above mentioned 43 pharmacies did not inform the consumer of the originator brand and generics. Even if these pharmacies did not have the generic drugs in stock at the time the 7 medications were purchased, they still should have clearly explained to the consumers of the non availability of cheaper options in their drug stores and left it to the consumer to decide whether he wanted to pay more and purchase originator brand medication from their pharmacies or check out other pharmacies. These 43 pharmacies may not have breached any law, but have denied a consumer his basic right to choice by dispensing originator brand drugs without giving the options for cheaper medication. Majority of the consumers are unaware of the difference originator brand and generic medications and thus the onus is on pharmacies to inform them of cheaper options.

Another issue of concern with pharmaceutical trade practices was the fraudulent practices of some pharmacies. For example our survey found three pharmacies selling generic medication labelled as originator brand and also charging the price of the originator brands which is much more expensive. Thakorlal Pharmacy in Nadi, Northern Drug Store and Wyse Pharmacy Nakasi dispensed generic *frusemide* tablets Apo but labelled it as Lasix which is an originator brand tablet and also charged the price of Lasix (\$4.65) which is much more expensive than generic Apo (\$1.35).

Pharmacies were also found dispensing wrong dosage of medications to consumers despite clear instructions given on the prescription. Consumers have faith in pharmacists that as professionals they would dispense right dosage of medication as per prescription. Too little or too much of any medication could have adverse effect on one's health. However, our survey revealed that Thakorlal's Pharmacy in Lautoka dispensed 5mg *enalapril* but the label stated 10mg as per the prescription. Mistakes of this nature can be injurious to patient's health. Similarly, Sugar City Pharmacy in Lautoka dispensed 15 *amoxicillin* capsules when prescription required a dosage of 9 capsules. Prescription handed by the Council clearly stated no repeats for this particular antibiotic.

There was also a major problem with receipts from the pharmacies where none of the 47 pharmacies surveyed gave receipts with individual medicine names however, 19 pharmacies did give out *itemised receipts with codes*. Some pharmacies also did not have basic information required by Fiji laws such as company name, tax number, and company address etc on their receipts.

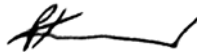
Three pharmacies did not have basic information required by Fiji laws such as the company name, tax number, company address etc on their receipts - Sugar City Pharmacy Lautoka, Chovhan Pharmacy Lautoka and Patel Pharmacy in Sigatoka. One pharmacy- Madison Pharmacy, Suva, provided a chit with total price when requested for a receipt by our staff.

Northern Drug Store, Labasa issued receipt from “My Chemist” instead of a receipt specifically for Northern Drug Store. Owners are same for My Chemist and Northern Drug Store.

The Council wants the Pharmacy and Poisons Board to take a more proactive role in regulating the pharmaceutical industry and its practices. This law needs to be effectively enforced by the Pharmacy and Poisons Board to curtail all breaches in trade practices and bring about transparency and accountability by the pharmaceutical sector.

Furthermore the Fiji Islands Revenue and Customs Authority (FIRCA) should also conduct investigation into all fraudulent practices including issuance of receipts with no TIN Number. The Fiji Pharmaceutical Society should also strengthen its code of ethics to ensure that its members act with honesty and integrity and professionally.

Due to lack of knowledge of medication, majority of consumers in Fiji place complete trusts in pharmacists for their health care however, results from our survey shows that this trust is often violated by the pharmacists by not informing the consumers of the choice over the generic and originator brand medication, not issuing proper receipts and fraudulent practices. Hence to bring about fair play and balance for consumers there needs to be effective enforcement of laws.



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Premila Kumar
Chief Executive Officer

