

Alert over Ritalin 'diversion'

EXCLUSIVE

Max Daly

The government's licit drug watchdog is set to warn doctors against prescribing Ritalin to people who they suspect will sell it on as a recreational drug.

The black market in the drug, a treatment for Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) mainly prescribed to children, exists at a low level compared to other prescription drugs in the UK.

But the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE), whose guidance on ADHD drugs is due out later this year, is sufficiently concerned to urge prescribers to exercise caution around giving the drug to people who may pass it on to others. Prescribers will have to consider alternative drugs to Ritalin if the person they are giving the drug to – or anyone in their family – has a record of being involved in drug dealing.

"Police have told me that Ritalin has been present in some seizures of illicit drugs," said Eric Taylor, a child psychiatrist specialising in ADHD and Chair of NICE's Guideline Development Group.

"Some of the kids who come into my clinic tell me that they have seen Ritalin pills being sold at their school for 50p. I think the black market in this drug operates at a very low level and is not a serious problem, but in specific cases, prescribers need to be aware of the risks of diversion." Pills are crushed and snorted to give a weak, cocaine-like high.

One child psychiatrist working in Bolton told Druglink she suspected that several parents were selling on their children's prescriptions of Ritalin.

Tony Francis, a drug and alcohol consultant working for Gloucestershire County Council, has come across Ritalin changing hands in schools. "Once the police were brought into school because kids were caught trading it for cannabis," said Francis.

"On another occasion the teachers were saying that some of the kids were 'going potty' and behaving in an aggressive and hyperactive way. The mystery was solved when one of the kids admitted to the school nurse that he was frightened after taking Ritalin."



Vigilance: doctors must be mindful of diversion

Francis said both incidents occurred at special educational needs schools in the county, whose pupils are more likely to suffer from ADHD and be prescribed Ritalin. But he added: "Compared to cannabis, Ritalin is few and far between."

One 15-year-old schoolboy from Liverpool who was suspended after being caught with Ritalin without a prescription, told Druglink: "Almost all the lads at school who get Ritalin prescribed gave out or sold at least some of them to their mates. They neck them when they are bored at school."

GPs in the UK, the world's second largest manufacturer of the drug, prescribed ADHD treatments such as Ritalin and Concerta to around 55,000 children in 2006 – at a cost of £28m to the NHS.

Ritalin is available, without prescription, over the internet from a wealth of illegitimate sellers for around £20 for a packet of 60 tablets. The black market in Ritalin, along with other brands such as Adderall and Concerta, has become a big problem in the US and New Zealand as a result of lax prescribing.

The NICE guidelines set similar warnings around diversion for another stimulant-based ADHD drug, Dexedrine, more commonly sold on the adult black market than Ritalin. Illegal Dexedrine was popular in the 1960s mod scene and inspired the name of the band Dexy's Midnight Runners.

DRUGS QUOTE

"We have sophisticated equipment to search people when they go in, but they avoided this"

Luciano Gamateli, director of Brazil's Marilia prison, after inmates trained pigeons living on the roof to smuggle in mobile phones and drugs using pouches on their backs

"Officials believe the Taliban were turning dried cannabis leaves into heroin"

The Daily Mail reports on magical goings on in Afghanistan

"Addicts push disability benefits bill up to £9bn"

What the Daily Telegraph forgot to mention: the bill for problem drug and alcohol users comes to 0.5 per cent of the £9bn

"We are now in the process of rethinking our customs dogs training"

Spokesman for Tokyo's Narita International Airport after three customs officers were suspended after admitting planting drugs in 160 passengers' bags in order to train sniffer dogs.

'Drug traffickers must be executed immediately'

Indonesia's Attorney General Hendarman Supandji announces the resumption of drug executions after two Nigerians are killed by firing squads