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Dicing with people's lives!

Amira Sayed

A WOMAN carrying her crying baby entered a well known pharmacy in Cairo and asked the pharmacist to give her any medication to soothe her baby. Shockingly, the pharmacist did not ask for a prescription and gave her colic drops. He did not even ask her about the baby's age.

Then, a man called the pharmacy, which has a home delivery service, and asked for insulin for diabetes. When the pharmacist asked him whether he used insulin tablets or injections, the man told him to deliver any kind of insulin! The pharmacist sent insulin tablets with the delivery man without even specifying the side effects of the drug.

Issues related to people's lives, experts say, must be given top priority since they are an essential component of national security. Human wealth is priceless. Giving medications without prescriptions puts the country's entire health system at risk. According to official statistics, the volume of annual drug sales is now LE28 billion (\$4 billion).

Dr Hossam Abdel Ghaffar, former spokesman of the Ministry of Health, told *The Egyptian Gazette* it is "catastrophic" to find pharmacists replacing doctors and diagnosing diseases without any background. The penal code should be amended to impose more deterrent penalties for this.

"In fact, the law stipulates that pharmacies selling medicines without prescriptions must be fined. But, these fines must be increased since the value of money



HEALTH HAZARD: Over-the-counter or nonprescription medicines pose threats to public health, experts say.

changes over the years. The pharmacists behave as they do to get more money. But big fines would deter them," he said.

The second step to face this problem, Abdel Ghaffar added, is to raise public awareness by all means. Media coverage is important. The majority of media outlets put the spotlight on doctors' mistakes. It is rare to find an article or a programme about giving drugs without prescriptions. Monitoring pharmacies is a must to prevent these practices.

Ola Ahmed, a pharmacist, admitted that

drugs are sold in a chaotic way and pharmacists are not happy with the situation. "What is the alternative? If I refuse to sell medicines without a prescription, the customer will buy what he wants from another pharmacy. Pharmacists are not guilty! Sometimes we are put in critical situations. For instance, many people come to the pharmacy at midnight asking for urgent help. Others do not consult doctors because they cannot afford their skyrocketing fees."

Prescriptions, she also pointed out, are not a guarantee that the drug is suitable for

the patient. "I know a family that is suffering from a cartilage complication and they consult a certain doctor. The doctor prescribes the same drugs for all members of the family without examining them, claiming they share the same symptom. This is dangerous because the side effects of drugs differ from person to person."

Saeed Ismail, a pharmacology professor at al-Azhar University, said the main role of any pharmacist is to protect people's health. Deviating from these rules is a "crime and social betrayal". Drugs are not juice or sweets. Overdoses may lead to fatal diseases such as kidney failure.

However, Dr Ismail stressed that the problem starts with the doctor, not the pharmacist. Some doctors prescribe a great many drugs, leaving patients confused. Doctors should write precise prescriptions. "The syndicate should also close pharmacies that break the law."

Essam Abdel Hamid, the secretary-general of the Pharmacists Syndicate, said the first step to reform the system is to improve hospitals. Patients have left hospitals and gone to private clinics due to deteriorating economic and social conditions. Unfortunately, when they resorted to clinics, they couldn't pay the high fees. So, they look to pharmacies to save their lives.

"Pharmacists only sell the over-the-counter drugs (OTC) that can be bought without a prescription such as the medicines for diarrhea, aches and high temperatures. The pharmacist is trying to fill the gap caused by an ailing health service."