

Buying medicines in Dar es Salaam

Do pharmacies follow regulations?



Introduction

Can medicines make us sick? Are they dispensed properly? Is the system of protecting people from misuse of medicine working? To answer these questions, Youth Initiatives Tanzania (YITA), in association with Twaweza, investigated whether pharmacies observe regulations regarding sales to consumers. The exercise was carried out in November 2011 through a survey of pharmacies by ‘mystery clients’ in Dar es Salaam.

This brief explains what happened during the mystery visits. It shows that, contrary to regulations, the majority of pharmacies sell prescription medicines without a prescription from a doctor. This raises questions about how the pharmacy business is monitored in Tanzania, and whether people’s health is adequately protected.

By selling drugs and other medical supplies, pharmacies provide a crucial health service. Pharmacies sell two types of medicines: *prescription drugs*, which can only be bought when the patient/buyer has an authorized doctor’s prescription, and *over the counter drugs* which can be bought at any time and do not require a prescription. The first type can cause serious harm when used improperly, and that is why they require a prescription. Buying and using prescription medicines

without a doctor's authority can harm or even poison the individual (e.g. when patients use the wrong medicines or in the wrong dosage) as well as harm other individuals' health (e.g. by creating resistance to medicines that are not properly used).

To prevent abuse of medicines, the Tanzania Food and Drugs Authority (TFDA, www.tfda.or.tz), a regulatory body under the Ministry of Health and Social Welfare, has been charged with the responsibility for controlling the quality, safety and effectiveness of food and drugs. TFDA sets regulations to protect people's health, which pharmacies are required to follow. All pharmacies must be registered under TFDA to operate in the country, and none are to sell any prescription medicines without prescriptions issued by authorized medical practitioners (doctors).

'No dispenser shall dispense any ADDO (Accredited Drug Dispensing Outlet) prescription medicines except on and in accordance with a prescription issued by a medical practitioner, dentist or veterinarian or any authorized prescriber.'

The Tanzanian Food, Drugs and Cosmetics (Pharmaceutical Business Standards) Regulations, 2006: Article 31;3

Methodology

The survey was carried out in November 2011 by field workers who made 126 'mystery visits' to 64 pharmacies in the three districts of Dar es Salaam: Ilala, Kinondoni and Temeke. In Ilala, pharmacies in the Central Business District and Kariakoo were monitored. In Kinondoni, the mystery clients (field workers) went to pharmacies located at Kinondoni, Magomeni, Manzese, Masaki, Msasani, Mwananyamala, Mwenge, Namanga, Savei/Mlimani City area and Sinza. In Temeke, they visited pharmacies at Chang'ombe, Kigamboni and Temeke. In each area several pharmacies were visited, with a higher number of pharmacies visited in more densely populated areas.

The three field workers were young women, each with a bachelor's degree or diploma. They visited pharmacies which were randomly selected from the list of the Tanzania Medical Directory (<http://tanzaniamedicaldirectory.com/html/list.html>). Initially, 64 pharmacies of the 264 (24 percent) listed pharmacies were selected. However, when the field workers realized on their first day of monitoring that many pharmacies from the list could not be found, they replaced the selected pharmacies with pharmacies in the same area; many of the replacements were not in the list of the Tanzania Medical Directory. Annex 1 lists the number of pharmacies that were monitored in each area and the number of visits made per area.

The ‘mystery visits’ to pharmacies were done in two different ways. The first (88 visits) entailed the field worker walking into a pharmacy and asking directly for a certain type of medicine for which one would need a prescription according to the regulations. The second approach (38 visits) involved the field worker discussing her sickness and symptoms or that of a family member with the pharmacy attendants, and asking for advice about what medication to take. Field workers were asked to persist – as people would do in ordinary circumstances – even if the pharmacies refused in the first instance.

Interactions between pharmacy attendants and field workers were carefully recorded, and receipts and medicines procured were systematically photographed and documented. In the images below the names of pharmacies on receipts are covered to avoid singling out any particular business.

Three facts about whether prescription medicines are sold properly

Fact 1: In 93 percent of 88 visits, prescription medicines were sold without a prescription

In 88 visits to pharmacies, field workers walked into a pharmacy and asked directly for a certain type of prescription medicine without offering a prescription. In 82 of those visits (93 percent), the pharmacies sold the medicines requested by the client without asking for a prescription.

Figure 1: Prescription medicines sold without a prescription when requested (%)



Source: YITA Pharmacy Survey, 2011.

Fact 2: In 92 percent of 38 visits, prescription medicines were sold after a client described symptoms

In 38 visits the field workers asked the pharmacies for advice after discussing the sickness and/or symptoms of their ailment. In 35 out of 38 (92 percent) of the visits, instead of advising the client to consult a doctor first, the pharmacy attendant recommended certain prescription medicines and sold the same to them.

Figure 2: Prescription medicines sold when clients seek advice without consultation of a doctor (%)



Source: YITA Pharmacy Survey, 2011.

Box 1: Example of an interaction where a client describes an ailment and asks for advice

'I told the pharmacist that I have a urinary tract infection and I asked her which type of medicine she thinks I can use to treat the disease. She went to her computer and typed something. After typing she turned to me and said, "It's 7,500 Shillings." Then I asked her, "What is the name of that medicine?" She turned the computer screen to me so that I could read. I read it and I asked her if she will give me the receipt if I would buy it. She said yes.'

Source: YITA Pharmacy Survey, 2011.

In total, in 117 out of the 126 visits (93 percent), prescription medicines were sold without asking for a doctor's prescription. Only in nine instances (7 percent) were clients refused to be sold prescription medicines without the requisite prescription. Figure 3 below shows examples of medicines procured improperly and the receipts provided.

Figure 3: Examples of prescription medicines and receipts sold without prescription

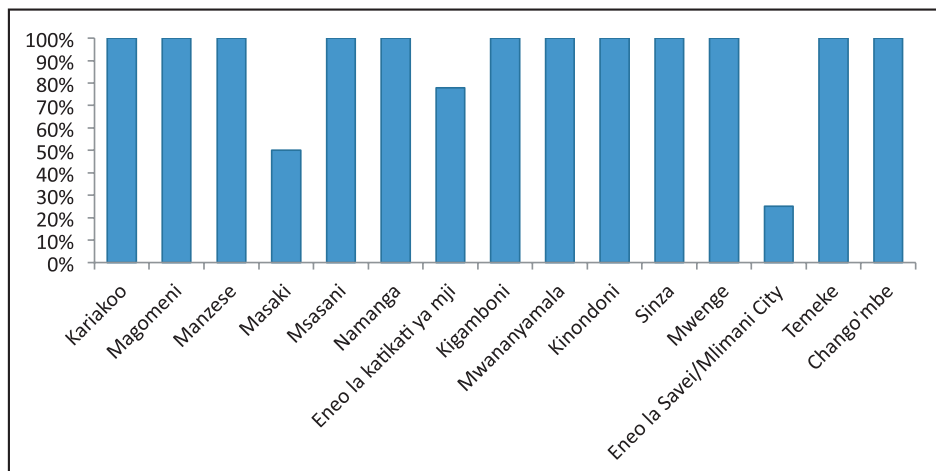


Source: YITA Pharmacy Survey, 2011.

Fact 3: In 12 of 15 areas visited, 100 percent of pharmacies sold medicines improperly

While overall it was very easy to get prescription medicines improperly in almost all cases, it was more difficult to do so in a few areas. In 12 of the 15 surveyed areas, the field workers were able to obtain prescription medicines without presenting a prescription in 100 percent of the visits (Figure 5). Only in three areas (Masaki, Central Business District, Savei/Mlimani) were they refused prescription medicine without a doctor’s prescription, and then only in some of the visits.

Figure 5: Prescription medicines sold without prescription by area



Source: YITA Pharmacy Survey, 2011.

Conclusion

This brief has presented findings of a monitoring exercise that sought to establish the extent to which pharmacies in Dar es Salaam adhere to the regulations regarding dispensing of prescription medicines laid down by the TFDA.

The survey, carried out by YITA in association with Twaweza in November 2011, found widespread disregard of the regulations. During nearly all visits (93 percent), pharmacies in Dar Es Salaam sold prescription medicines to clients improperly. A number of reports by mystery clients even show that pharmacy attendants can be easily manipulated by clients who do not have a prescription from a doctor.

In both sets of approaches used – whether a client asked for medicines by name or asked for advice about how to treat a particular ailment – the results were the same. It is clear that TFDA regulations are violated frequently across Dar es Salaam and that the system for regulation is not working.

The consequences of this practice are that citizens' health is placed at significant risk. These include:

- Patients may administer incorrect dosages which can lead to drug resistance and other complications, including poisoning;
- Patients may end up taking wrong medicines which places their health in danger; and
- Patients may develop dependence on certain medicines.

This monitoring exercise did not examine the reasons for the broad prevalence of this problem, but one can speculate. Could it be that the pharmacy attendants are not properly trained and aware? Or are they aware but the profit motive of the pharmacy owners, combined with a weak regulatory system, makes them ignore their knowledge and sell medicines improperly anyway? Or is the primary driver for this practice the strong expectation from citizens to get medicines quickly and easily, without the cost, hassle and at times ill-treatment at the hands of medical personnel?

We do not know the definitive answers to these questions. But if we care about the health and well-being of people, grappling with these questions and finding pragmatic solutions should be a key concern for the TFDA, the Ministry of Health and citizens alike.

Annex 1: Pharmacies visited and medicines supply behaviour

Area	No. of pharmacies monitored	No. of mystery visits	Medicines sold without prescription	Medicines not sold without prescription	Medicines sold without prescription (%)
Kariakoo	11	22	22	0	100%
Magomeni	4	8	8	0	100%
Manzese	3	6	6	0	100%
Masaki	3	4	2	2	50%
Msasani	4	8	8	0	100%
Namanga	2	4	4	0	100%
Central Business District	9	18	14	4	78%
Kigamboni	2	4	4	0	100%
Mwananyamala	4	8	8	0	100%
Kinondoni	5	10	10	0	100%
Sinza	5	9	9	0	100%
Mwenge	4	8	8	0	100%
Savei/Mlimani City	2	4	1	3	25%
Temeke	4	8	8	0	100%
Chang'ombe	2	5	5	0	100%
Total	64	126	117	9	93%

Source: YITA Pharmacy Survey, 2011.

NB: In Savei/Mlimani City only one pharmacy in each area was monitored. Two mystery visits in each pharmacy were conducted.

Annex 2: Number of visits and medicines supplied

Total visits	126
Sold on request	82
Not sold on request	6
Sold seeking advice	35
Not sold seeking advice	3

Source: YITA Pharmacy Survey, 2011.