

Fighting the Online Drug Corner

By Mathea Falco and Philip Heymann
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Close to 10 percent of high school seniors have used an addictive, dangerous prescription narcotic within the past year. This is more than 10 times the rate of heroin use. Only tobacco, alcohol and marijuana are abused more frequently. Many young people wrongly believe that prescription painkillers, even if taken without a prescription, are not addictive and are much safer than street drugs. They also say that prescription drugs are "available everywhere."

Although we don't know precisely how much prescription narcotic drug abuse is fueled by Internet purchases, we can get a sense of the availability of these drugs by going online and searching for, say, "vicodin without prescription" or "oxycontin without prescription." Search engines immediately identify thousands of Web sites that advertise these drugs and offer to take any major credit card for payment. The vast reach of the Internet makes it as easy for American adolescents to buy drugs as it is for them to buy books or music. If the Internet is not already the primary enabler of this epidemic, it soon will be.

Stiffer penalties on the sellers of these drugs will not make an appreciable dent in Internet sales. Most of the Web sites offering these drugs are hosted outside the United States, with the sellers well beyond the reach of U.S. law enforcement. A site selling [Vicodin](#) without a prescription can be created on a computer in [Uzbekistan](#), registered to a business address in [Pakistan](#) and deposit payments to a [Cayman Islands](#) bank. The drugs can be produced in a country that doesn't require prescriptions for narcotics. To believe that international law enforcement cooperation will make this globalized business dangerous for the sellers would be a tragic mistake.

Tougher standards for what constitutes a valid online prescription, as Sen. [Dianne Feinstein](#)'s pending legislation would mandate, are important if the whole system of legitimate Internet sales of prescription drugs is not to collapse. But rogue pharmacies operating in lawless locations will continue offering to sell narcotics to teenagers without prescriptions -- or with the phoniest pretense of a prescription -- happily using the unwitting cooperation of U.S. search engines, Internet service providers and credit card companies. We need additional legislation to require the legitimate businesses that are key intermediaries in illegal online drug transactions to withdraw their assistance.

Specifically, credit card companies and their sponsoring financial institutions should prohibit the use of their services for illicit sales of controlled substances and should enforce that prohibition. A credit card company could easily identify customers involved in such sales by putting through a "test" order when it learns of a Web site offering drugs illegally and accepting its credit card for payment. When such a site is identified, the credit card company should notify U.S. law enforcement authorities, who in turn would be obligated to notify Internet service providers, search engines and package delivery companies.

Search engines that profit from ads attached to their listings of Vicodin sources -- such ads include "Buy Prescriptions" and "No Prescription Needed. Overnighted Totally Legal. Want To Know How?" -- should automatically provide a banner warning that such purchases are illegal and describing the dangers of the drugs whenever searches for such terms are requested. In addition, Internet service providers should, in a highly public way, offer customers the use of spam filters to exclude from their homes offers for illegal sales of any controlled substance, such as prescription narcotics.

None of these steps is costly or technologically challenging. The corporations whose services facilitate online drug sales to our children should have taken action years ago. It is not enough for Congress to try once more to target foreign dealers who are beyond the reach of our laws. The way to curtail online sales of dangerous drugs is to enlist American credit card companies, search engines and Internet service providers in the fight.

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