



## Latter to the Editor

# Addressing over-the-counter drug abuse: A call for stricter regulations and public awareness campaigns

Sowparnika Treasa Sabu<sup>1\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Indian Council of Medical Research Headquarters, New Delhi, India



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## 1. Introduction

The misuse of Over-the-Counter (OTC) medications has become a pressing concern globally, and the issue is particularly pertinent in developing nations like India.<sup>1</sup> These medications, readily available without a prescription, are intended to provide quick and cost-effective relief for common ailments. However, the unrestricted access and lack of regulatory oversight have led to their widespread misuse, posing significant public health challenges.<sup>2</sup>

## 2. The Growing Problem of OTC Drug Abuse

OTC medications, such as pain relievers, antihistamines, cough syrups, and antacids, are frequently misused for self-medication, recreational purposes, or even dependency.<sup>3</sup> For example:

*Codeine-based cough syrups* are often consumed in large quantities for their euphoric effects, leading to addiction.<sup>4</sup> *Painkillers like paracetamol* are overused<sup>4</sup>, causing severe liver damage and, in extreme cases, fatalities. *Laxatives and weight-loss supplements* are often misused, particularly among younger populations, leading to serious gastrointestinal and metabolic complications.

According to recent reports, the lack of consumer awareness about potential risks, combined with easy availability, has exacerbated this problem. Furthermore,

during the COVID-19 pandemic, the reliance on OTC drugs surged as individuals sought immediate remedies for flu-like symptoms without consulting healthcare professionals.

## 3. Regulatory Challenges and Gaps

India's current regulatory framework for OTC drugs remains fragmented and inadequate. Unlike prescription medications, there is no comprehensive list of approved OTC drugs, leaving room for ambiguity. Key challenges include:

- 1. Absence of a Standardized OTC Drug List:** India does not have a universally accepted classification of OTC drugs, unlike the U.S. FDA or the European Medicines Agency..
- 2. Weak Enforcement Mechanisms:** While the Drugs and Cosmetics Act mandates proper labeling and warnings, enforcement is often lax.
- 3. Unregulated Online Sales:** The rise of e-pharmacies has made it easier to access OTC drugs, often bypassing legal safeguards.

## 4. The Role of Public Awareness

Addressing OTC drug abuse requires not only stricter regulations but also robust public awareness campaigns. Many individuals misuse these drugs due to misinformation, believing they are entirely safe since they are sold without

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: [sowparnikatreasasabu19@gmail.com](mailto:sowparnikatreasasabu19@gmail.com) (S. T. Sabu).

a prescription. Effective awareness campaigns should focus on:

1. **Educating Consumers:** Highlighting the risks associated with OTC drug misuse, such as dependency, organ damage, and drug interactions.
2. **Engaging Healthcare Professionals:** Encouraging pharmacists and doctors to counsel patients on proper OTC drug use.
3. **Targeted Outreach:** Leveraging digital platforms and social media to reach younger demographics, who are particularly vulnerable to misuse.

## 5. Recommendations for Regulatory Reforms

To mitigate OTC drug abuse, India needs a multifaceted approach involving policy reform, industry accountability, and community engagement. Some key recommendations include:

1. **Creation of a National OTC Drug List:** This list should clearly categorize drugs that can be sold without a prescription, along with their permitted dosages and indications.
2. **Mandatory Training for Pharmacists:** Ensure pharmacists are adequately trained to provide guidance on OTC drug use and to identify cases of potential misuse.
3. **Monitoring Online Sales:** Implement stringent regulations for e-pharmacies, including mandatory prescription uploads for high-risk drugs.
4. **Introduction of Tamper-Proof Packaging:** Packaging that includes detailed warnings and dosage instructions can help reduce misuse.

## 6. Conclusion

In conclusion, OTC medications, while a boon for accessible healthcare, can become a bane if misused. India must address this growing crisis through stricter regulations, effective enforcement, and public education campaigns. By doing so, we can ensure that OTC drugs continue to serve their purpose of promoting self-care without compromising public health.

## 7. Conflict of Interest

None.

## 8. Source of Funding

None.

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## Author's biography

Sowparnika Treasa Sabu, Scientist-III

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