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Investigation: The Wild West of Men's 'Health' Websites

Online companies are taking advantage of men's discomfort with talking openly about their physical appearance by offering them hair-loss medications without warning them of the potential for serious side effects

By Brigitte Noel and Daniel Blanchette Pelletier

Exposed to a constant stream of social-media images of heads full of thick hair, more and more men are turning to medications to combat baldness. In Canada, the number of prescriptions for finasteride, a popular hair-loss treatment, has increased by 50% in the last decade.

This surge in popularity is partly driven by the proliferation of online pharmacies and telemedicine sites claiming to be dedicated to men's health. But while these sites, some of which are outright illegal, flood the web with ads touting the benefits of these products, our investigation reveals that they are discreet about the rare but devastating side effects they can cause.

After weeks of being bombarded with ads for baldness products, *John finally succumbed to temptation. In just a few clicks, the 32-year-old Ontario resident managed to get a prescription.

"It's an incredibly accessible drug," he says. "There's so much content out there pushing young men toward these products. Every time I'm on Instagram, I'm targeted by these ads."

He only used the drug for two weeks. He quickly began noticing sexual side effects and stopped taking it.

"I stopped, and things started getting worse." His symptoms—erectile dysfunction, testicular pain, cognitive fog, and suicidal thoughts—have persisted for nearly four years.

He says this pain prevents him from doing his job well, and his love life has taken a hit. "I just got engaged, and I'm worried I won't be able to have kids because it's not working down there anymore."

Around the world, tens of thousands of men report suffering from sexual and psychiatric side effects caused by 5-alpha reductase inhibitors, such as finasteride and dutasteride. In some men, these side effects last for months or even years, a condition sometimes referred to as post-finasteride syndrome.

A Radio-Canada investigation recently highlighted the rare but devastating, persistent, and often overlooked risks associated with the use of these popular drugs. A disturbing allegation: Merck, the pharmaceutical company that invented finasteride nearly 30 years ago, was allegedly aware of the risks, which it continually tried to minimize. It has always maintained that its drug is safe and that only a small percentage of users experience side effects.

In recent years, Health Canada has added numerous warnings to the finasteride product monograph: the risks of persistent sexual dysfunction were added in 2011. In 2024, it required the addition of risks of “mood changes, including depressed mood, depression, self-harm, and suicidal ideation.”

However, these warnings do not seem to be taken seriously by a new cohort of telemedicine sites, which seem to sell these drugs without any real consultation and, above all, without much mention of the risks associated with their use.

Disturbing findings

Do these sites really take the time to evaluate their patients? And do they provide the necessary warnings so that consumers can make a free and informed choice?

Our team tested this on three sites whose advertisements are particularly ubiquitous on the web: Jack Health, Rocky, and Essential Clinic. In just a few hours, we managed to obtain three prescriptions for finasteride simultaneously.

In all three cases, we simply had to fill out a brief questionnaire about our health status and provide identification and photos of our hair—which was barely thinning.

The prescriptions were approved without having to speak to anyone and without reviewing all the possible risks and side effects. Essential Clinic, for example, referred to a PDF document that was voluntary, while Rocky claimed that additional information could be viewed upon receipt of the order.

The medications were mailed immediately and arrived a few days later, directly to our door. Rocky’s shipment did not come with the promised information.

Two of the boxes actually contained only a simple jar filled with the medication, with its dosage. A disturbing detail: Rocky’s prescription bore the name of the person who paid for the product, not that of the patient to whom it had been prescribed. Only the third box—the one from Jack Health—contained more detailed information on finasteride.

The president of the Ordre des pharmaciens du Québec, Jean-François Desgagné, accuses these online platforms of trivializing the sale and administration of medications. “We really need to question the principle of how these prescriptions are obtained, who is behind it,” he says. “It’s done in a few minutes. It makes no sense.”

These companies, in his opinion, sell medications as “lifestyle” products. He also criticizes the fact that their business model often relies on automatically renewing subscriptions.

In two of these cases, the companies from which we obtained finasteride even billed us before the prescription was approved. Even though Rocky assures us that clients for whom the drug isn’t authorized will be reimbursed, the pressure to prescribe is strong, says Desgagné.

“We’re currently seeing a major commercialization of health care,” says Dr. René Wittmer, president of Choisir avec soin Québec, an organization that promotes the judicious use of medication.

“Is this person going to make money because they’re selling me something, or is this person really trying to help me?” he wonders, concerned about the phenomenon. “I feel like we’re trivializing the use of this medication by saying that side effects are rare, as if they don’t really exist,” the doctor laments.

The Collège des médecins du Québec also states that it is “concerned by this type of company outside Quebec that offers medical consultations and sends medications by mail.” It states that physicians are required to comply with their Code of Ethics and must prescribe medication only if necessary.

Side Effect Alert

In their messages approving our prescription, these healthcare professionals did not address the risks of suicidal thoughts or depression, nor the fact that these side effects could persist even after the person stops taking the medication. The information often limited itself to erectile dysfunction, low libido, difficulty ejaculating, mood disorders, or headaches. Rocky even states that the side effects “tend to disappear after stopping” the medication.

When completing their questionnaires, we also specified—in two cases—prerequisites: depression and reduced libido. The prescriptions were approved without additional verification, despite the fact that some patients’ medical history may increase the risks.

“The assessment should not be limited to an online form without discussion with the patient,” says Francis Richard, assistant clinical professor at the Faculty of Pharmacy at the Université de Montréal. “Laboratory tests are also necessary before prescribing finasteride to rule out other causes of alopecia,” such as anemia or hypothyroidism.

He adds that the risks and benefits of the different treatment options “must be discussed to lead to a shared decision, since the adverse effects of certain medications, such as finasteride, can have long-term consequences.”

It should be noted that all three platforms also sell medications for erectile dysfunction, the most commonly reported adverse effect of finasteride.

“They’re winning on all fronts because they sell two things: hair medications and erectile dysfunction medications,” says Simon, a 40-year-old from Trois-Rivières who says he’s been suffering from post-finasteride syndrome for a year and a half.

He laments the fact that the healthcare professionals at Essential Clinic, the site that provided his initial prescription, didn’t ask any questions when he wanted to get a medication to combat erectile dysfunction. “They could have made the connection when I contacted them.”

Desgagné points out that a local pharmacist could have identified this issue. When you dispense a medication, do you scroll through the ten pages of the monograph? No. But the most important message conveyed to the patient is: “If there’s anything wrong with it, come back and see us,” he says.

This bond of trust with the local pharmacist is the best defense against the trivialization of a medication.

Capitalizing on Men’s Insecurities

Online drug sales services seem to take advantage of the fact that men prefer not to talk about their appearance and thus avoid having to consult a professional. Rocky presents itself as a company founded by young healthcare professionals, dedicated to normalizing highly stigmatized health issues and guaranteeing safety, trust, confidentiality, and discretion.

No need to meet face-to-face, make a phone call, or wait long periods in waiting rooms. Just quality healthcare available online to serve you, says Essential Clinics. To say that going to a pharmacy can be embarrassing is misleading, believes Desgagné. No pharmacist is going to judge people who come to pick up a prescription.

Consulting a doctor and then a pharmacist allows the patient to fully understand the medication prescribed, its potential side effects, and to weigh the pros and cons before starting treatment. I think people need help making informed decisions, agrees the pharmacist.

However, online companies don't seem to take the time to adequately communicate the risks associated with taking finasteride.

The Tip of the Iceberg

While telemedicine sites offer incomplete warnings, other players sell finasteride clandestinely: without mentioning the risks, but, more importantly, without a prescription. Some of these markets are linked to one of the largest forums on the Reddit platform, a community called r/Tressless (without hair), where more than 300,000 members discuss their concerns about baldness.

Its users show the results of their finasteride or dutasteride prescriptions and tend to mock anyone who mentions potential side effects. It was this forum that influenced Wei, a 29-year-old Montrealer.

They said it was better to take it before it was too late, as a preventative measure, he recalls. When some Internet users tried to report their side effects, they were attacked. People were saying, "They're just bald men trying to drag us down with them," he says. And a few days, a week later, those comments warning of the risks of finasteride had been deleted.

Wei decided to take the thousands of comments in favor of finasteride into account: he ordered a topical version of the drug, which he took for nine days. A host of sexual, physical, and cognitive side effects have plagued him ever since.

The forum appears to monetize young men's insecurities: users are encouraged to visit an "information" site, also called Tressless, which offers links to a host of websites including several international pharmacies, some of which require no prescription, which is illegal in Canada.

These sites contain cookies that track the sites that send them clicks, which most likely indicates that Tressless acts as an affiliate and is compensated for the clicks it sends to these online stores.

Faced with these findings, Reddit says it has launched an investigation. "We have contacted the moderators of r/Tressless to inform them of this investigation and remind them of our policies," writes a spokesperson. She confirms that the site's rules "prohibit the solicitation or facilitation of

transactions involving controlled substances, including direct links to illegitimate transaction sites.”

Health Canada also says it has opened a compliance audit of these sites.

Online Health

Health Canada warns against purchasing medications online, as many pharmacies operate illegitimately, according to the federal agency.

For example, it is illegal for a patient to order medication from another country and have it delivered to Canada. A valid prescription is also required to obtain medication from an online pharmacy established in Canada. These pharmacies must be licensed and comply with the standards of practice of the province or territory where they are located.

The federal agency, however, disclaims responsibility for monitoring telemedicine sites. Although they offer services across the country, Health Canada states that it is up to the provinces to enforce their regulations.

This is not easy, given the pan-Canadian nature of prescribers and their clients: Rocky, based in Ontario, used a registered nurse practitioner in Alberta and an Ontario pharmacist to deliver our prescription. Essential Clinic, whose website addresses are in Calgary, Alberta, used the services of a Quebec-based physician and a pharmacy in British Columbia. Jack Health conducted all of its activities in Ontario.

Contacted by Radio-Canada, representatives from Rocky and Essential Clinic told us they met all required standards and offered a secure service. Jack Health, for its part, did not respond to our questions. However, none of these sites have legal status in Quebec, according to the Ministry of Health and Social Services, which states, however, that the practice of pharmacy is regulated by the Order of Pharmacists and that its power to intervene with regard to these sellers is limited.

Following our revelations, the Quebec Order of Pharmacists promised to look into the activities of these companies. Steps have already been taken to ban them from the Quebec market.

“We have a responsibility to protect public health,” says its president, Desgagné. “And we have questions about the legality of these services in Quebec. We won’t let this go, that’s clear.”

The Order has already succeeded in blocking certain online pharmacies in Quebec. But to do so, Jean-François Desgagné explains that his team must approach their counterparts in the provinces where the pharmacies that violate Quebec laws are located.

We contacted the professional orders of physicians, nurses, and pharmacists in the four provinces involved in our investigation. The websites all fall outside their jurisdiction, but they ensure that the healthcare professionals they partner with are required to respect their standards and practices. They also have the right to offer services between provinces if their patients request it. In the event of a problem, the order of the province in which they are registered will intervene.

Desgagné believes that the federal government must get involved to establish transjurisdictional regulations and harmonize standards of practice between territories. “The Internet is often seen

as a place where the law doesn't apply," he emphasizes. "But when there are standards of practice, these standards must apply as much to community pharmacies as to online pharmacies."

**John is a pseudonym intended to protect his privacy.*