



4-1-2005

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Recommended Citation

Woelfel, J. A. (2005). A different drug, a different country, but the same brand name?. *Pharmacist's Letter & Prescriber's Letter*, 21(4), 1-3.

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A Different Drug, a Different Country, but the Same Brand Name?

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Background

Can the same brand name drug contain a different active ingredient in a different country? The answer to this question is, unfortunately, yes. With the growing trend in drug reimportation from other countries, differences in actual drug content are being discovered for the same brand name. With increased travel to countries outside the US and Canada, greater and lengthened military service in foreign countries, and expanded use of the internet for less expensive prescription drugs, the possibility of acquiring a brand name drug with an unexpected active ingredient is increasing.

The Institute for Safe Medication Practices (ISMP) recently reported that a patient taking *Dilacor XR* (diltiazem extended release) 120 mg daily for hypertension received a different product with the same name while traveling in Serbia. This patient ran out of the US prescribed product and obtained *Dilacor* from a Serbian pharmacy. The pharmacist filled the prescription with the Serbian *Dilacor* brand which is digoxin. The patient did not notice the difference in product strength or appearance and continued to take the Serbian *Dilacor*. Because the patient felt that his hypertension was not being controlled, he elected to take extra daily doses. Three days later, he developed signs of digoxin toxicity, was admitted to an emergency facility, and treated with *Digibind* (digoxin immune FAB).¹

Dilacor is also the brand name for the antihypertensive agents barnidipine in Argentina and verapamil in Brazil.²

Commentary

This is one example of the same brand name being used by different manufacturers for different drugs in other countries. There are several other examples. *Flomax* (tamsulosin) for benign prostatic hyperplasia manufactured by Boehringer Ingelheim for the US and Canadian

markets shares the same brand name, *Flomax* (morniflumate), that is used for pain, fever, or inflammation as manufactured by Chiesi in Italy. The antidepressant, *Norpramin* (desipramine), produced by Aventis, is the anti-ulcer drug, omeprazole (*Norpramin*) in Spain where it is produced by CEPA. *Sominex* (diphenhydramine) is promethazine in the United Kingdom; *Vivelle* (estradiol) is ethinylestradiol, norgestimate by Janssen-Cilag in Austria; *Fiorinal* contains aspirin, butalbital, and caffeine but in Australia it is paracetamol, codeine, and doxylamine.²

Foreign over-the-counter (OTC) brand products may not be the same and may even have the same brand name as a prescription product. *Cartia* is an enteric coated aspirin product in Israel, Australia, New Zealand, and Hong Kong. In the US *Cartia XT* is extended release diltiazem. US and Canadian OTC brand name extensions create confusion due to the practice of reusing OTC brand names for products with different ingredients. *Unisom* in the US and Canada contains doxylamine whereas *Unisom SleepGels* contain diphenhydramine as marketed in both countries.³

Currently there is no international body that oversees brand name selection by pharmaceutical manufacturers. The World Health Organization has established general principles for devising international nonproprietary names for pharmaceuticals.⁵ They also maintain international monographs for pharmaceutical substances.⁶ Proprietary name regulation will be another major area for international observation, control, and safety.

As noted by the ISMP, brand name differences in foreign countries are one problem but so are differences in dosage forms for the same generic with their suffix listings. Drug dosage form release characteristics, as represented by the brand name suffix (*XR*, *LA*, *XL*, etc.) vary and can cause patients to receive too much or too little of an out-

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of-country obtained medication. There is no international nomenclature standard for release characteristics.²

Look-alike and sound-alike brand name drug lists are readily available in the US and Canada. There is a great potential for patient safety problems with foreign look-alike and sound-alike brand names. *Unisomnia* in Great Britain is a benzodiazepine, nitrazepam, used for insomnia.⁴ Nitrazepam's brand name is *Sonotrat* in Brazil. When written, it might be confused with *Sonata* (zaleplon) also used for insomnia in the US and Canada.⁴ *Trexall* is methotrexate in the US but *Trexan* is naltrexone in Italy. *Amyben*, available in the United Kingdom, is amiodarone. If this were dispensed for the sedative, *Ambien* (zolpidem) a significant adverse event could occur.² *Trental* is pentoxifylline in the US and Canada. *Trentadil* is bamifylline, a bronchodilator, in France.⁴ The antipsychotic, *Prolixin*, (fluphenazine) might look like and sound like *Prolixan* (azapropazone), a non-steroidal anti-inflammatory agent, used in some European countries.⁴ International cautionary lists do not exist at this time for brand names.

Advice

Patients who are traveling abroad should have a complete list of their medications with both brand and generic names including the brand dosage form, dosage, use frequency, and purpose of use. They should bring a sufficient supply of their medications in labeled bottles or packages with allowances for unexpected travel delays. Should they need a refill, remind them to actively check the generic name, dosage form, and strength to confirm a match. If they are ordering medication from an internet pharmacy they should ask their prescriber to clearly write this same information on the prescription.

Healthcare professionals needing information on imported or foreign country medications may find references such as the Micromedex products, *Martindale: The Complete Drug Reference* and *Index Nominum International Drug Directory*, helpful. Lexi-Comp's *Lexi-Drugs International* is an additional source.

Drug information or poison control centers in the US can be contacted for help. In the US the national toll-free number is: 800-222-1222. The American Association of Poison Control Centers

maintains a complete list of poison control centers. They include centers in Canada, New Zealand, Australia, and Puerto Rico. Their website can be found at: <http://www.aapcc.org/findyour.htm>. In Canada, a list of poison control centers can be found at: <http://www.capcc.com> or http://www.napra.org/practice/Toolkits/Toolkit6/poison_control.html. Be aware that every center may not be able to immediately answer a question, unless it is of an emergency basis.

Encourage reporting of potential product problems or actual occurrences. To report product problems in the US, call the FDA MEDWATCH program at 1-800-FDA-1088. The MEDWATCH program is also available on-line at www.fda.gov/medwatch. Or report to the USP Medication Errors Reporting Program in cooperation with the Institute for Safe Medication Practices at 1-800-23-ERROR or at www.usp.org/patientSafety/reporting/mer.html. In Canada, call the Canadian Adverse Drug Reaction Monitoring Program at 1-866-234-2345. The Canadian adverse reaction reporting form can be found at: http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/hpfb-dgpsa/tpd-dpt/adverse_e.pdf. It should be completed and faxed to 1-866-678-6789. You can also contact the Institute for Safe Medication Practices (ISMP) by calling 215-947-7797 or reporting on-line at www.ismp.org/Pages/communications.asp.

Users of this document are cautioned to use their own professional judgment and consult any other necessary or appropriate sources prior to making clinical judgments based on the content of this document. Our editors have researched the information with input from experts, government agencies, and national organizations. Information and Internet links in this article were current as of the date of publication.

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Cite this Detail-Document as follows: A different drug, a different country, but the same brand name?. Pharmacist's Letter/Prescriber's Letter 2005;21(4):210401.

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