Letter to the Editor

Pseudoephedrine at international borders: advising the unwary traveller

Gerard T. Flaherty, MB1,2*, Chee H. Liew, MB, MSc1, and Peter A. Leggat, MD, PhD1,3

1School of Medicine, National University of Ireland Galway, Galway, Ireland, 2School of Medicine, International Medical University, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia and 3College of Public Health, Medical and Veterinary Sciences, James Cook University, Townsville, Australia

*To whom correspondence should be addressed. Email: gerard.flaherty@nuigalway.ie

Submitted 29 November 2018; Revised 3 December 2018; Editorial decision 3 December 2018; Accepted 5 December 2018

The recent growth in international tourism is predicted to continue into the next decade, reaching 1.8 billion international tourist arrivals by 2030.1 The hazards associated with the use and illegal transportation of recreational drugs of abuse have been discussed previously in this journal.2 An analysis of nearly 5000 travellers attending a travel health clinic determined that 32% were taking at least one medication for management of a chronic illness.3 The most frequently encountered medical condition in that study was hay fever, which was reported by nearly a quarter of travellers. It is unknown what proportion of travellers carry over-the-counter non-prescription medicines, including nasal decongestants, for personal use, but this is likely to be even greater given that travel health kits are frequently recommended in clinical practice.

From our experience of counselling travellers in the travel clinic, we have observed a striking lack of traveller awareness in relation to the restrictions, which can complicate the transportation of freely available medications, such as pseudoephedrine, across some international borders. Pseudoephedrine is a naturally occurring plant alkaloid, which is used in the illegal synthesis of certain methamphetamine stimulants. A recent systematic review corroborates the common clinical recommendation to use oral pseudoephedrine in the prevention of otic barotrauma in adults.4 Additionally, travellers may self-medicate with pseudoephedrine for the relief of nasal obstructive symptoms associated with upper respiratory tract infections. This is particularly relevant to northern hemisphere travellers who travel during the current winter season.

Media accounts of unfortunate travellers, who have been prosecuted owing to drug offences involving the carriage of over-the-counter medicines, create anxiety among travellers and their medical practitioners. It is essential that travel medicine clinicians are familiar with reliable online sources of information about medication transportation across borders, so that they can properly advise intending travellers. While travellers are often referred to national embassy websites, in reputable agencies such as the Foreign and Commonwealth Office in the UK, or the International Narcotics Control Board (INCB) website (http://www.incb.org), there is significant inconsistency regarding the presentation of national regulations and some information are ambiguous. In some cases not all countries have submitted updated information to the INCB database.

The Pharmacist Professional Group of the International Society of Travel Medicine has tabulated a comprehensive directory of country-specific medication restrictions, accompanied by a disclaimer, which reminds users of the limitations of the information provided.5 Countries are listed alphabetically with information in each case from the INCB website, if available, and additional official government websites. Japan, for example, strictly enforces its anti-stimulant drugs law and lists pseudoephedrine as a prohibited substance in incoming travellers. Visitors to the United Arab Emirates should be aware that pseudoephedrine is a controlled substance at that border, according to the 1998 United Nations Convention.

We believe that sources of information, such as the ISTM database, should be communicated to all travellers in the pre-travel setting. It is the travellers’ responsibility then to inform themselves of the local laws relating to transportation of medications, such as pseudoephedrine, for their specific travel itinerary. It may be necessary for travellers to seek clarification from national officials such as the relevant embassy or consulate. A heightened awareness of this issue may help to prevent unintended legal consequences during international travel.

Conflict of interest: None declared.
Funding
None received.

References