



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

**HEALTH SCIENCES AUTHORITY
PRESS RELEASE**

24 MARCH 2011

HSA ALERTS PUBLIC TO HARMFUL “BLACK PILLS” TARGETED AT ELDERLY CONSUMERS

The Health Sciences Authority (HSA) alerts members of the public to the peddling of unlabelled bottles of black pills, touted for the treatment of a wide range of medical conditions such as arthritic and rheumatic pain, high cholesterol and hypertension. At least two elderly patients have been reported to have fallen seriously ill after consuming these pills. The pills are sold in clear bottles without a product/brand name or other essential information such as ingredients, dosage instructions, etc.

2 HSA’s analysis of these black pills revealed the presence of two undeclared western medicinal ingredients, namely dexamethasone and chlorpheniramine (see Annex). Dexamethasone is a potent steroid that requires a doctor’s prescription and supervision. These black pills are considered as illegal products as these products are not allowed to contain such ingredients.

3 HSA reiterates the dangers of buying health products from dubious sources and to be very wary of complementary health products that provide quick relief of chronic conditions such as pain and swelling, as they can cause serious side effects.

THE SALE OF BLACK PILLS

4 HSA has received several reports on the peddling of these unlabelled bottles of black pills for the treatment of a wide range of medical conditions such as arthritic and rheumatic pain, high cholesterol and hypertension. The majority of the consumers targeted by the peddlers were elderly persons above 50 years of age.

5 This issue was first reported to HSA by two alert members of the public who were concerned after finding out that their family members were taking these pills. The pills were tested by HSA’s laboratory which revealed the presence of two undeclared western medicinal ingredients, namely dexamethasone and chlorpheniramine. Subsequently, HSA also received adverse drug reaction (ADR) reports from two doctors about two patients in their 50s who were found to display signs and symptoms of Cushing’s syndrome such as a “round moon-face” and uncontrolled hypertension (these are some of the symptoms associated with long-term steroid consumption) after taking the same pills.

6 So far, the peddling of these unlabelled bottles of black pills has been reported in Jurong and Waterloo Street. HSA is currently investigating into the matter to track down the source(s) of these adulterated and harmful products.

IMPORTANT ADVISORY

7 “Over the recent span of eight weeks, we have received feedback both from consumers and doctors on the sale of these pills at different locations. We have grounds to believe that many unwitting consumers may be in possession of these pills and that there could still be people peddling these black pills to unsuspecting members of the public. This is of very grave concern as the adulterants found are very potent substances which can cause serious and fatal adverse effects in people who consume these pills”, says Ms Chan Cheng Leng, HSA’s Division Director of Enforcement. “These peddlers will continue to supply these pills as long as consumers continue to drive demand. We urge members of the public not to buy health products that are unlabelled, even if they are from well-intentioned friends and relatives or from dubious sources, for example from peddlers or the Internet.”

8 Consumers should be wary of unlabelled health products such as these “black pills” that are touted to contain only natural ingredients and yet are able to provide quick relief of symptoms such as pain associated with chronic disease conditions. There is a strong likelihood that such products may contain potent undeclared western medicinal substances that could bring about side effects if taken unknowingly and without supervision.

9 Members of the public are advised to:

- i) see a doctor immediately if they have been taking these black pills
- ii) advise their family members or friends not to buy or take such unlabelled products or any health products from dubious sources
- iii) contact HSA’s Enforcement Branch at Tel: 6866 3485 (Monday to Friday) or email: hsa_is@hsa.gov.sg if they have information on the sale and consumption of such pills. Their leads are important and could help prevent more people from being harmed by these dangerous illegal products.

10 To peddlers of illegal health products, Ms Chan warns, “HSA takes a serious view against those engaged in the sale and supply of illegal health products and will take strong enforcement action against these persons. It is a serious and irresponsible act, especially when the peddlers are profiteering at the expense of the elderly or the unsuspecting and vulnerable members of the public.”

11 Traditional and complementary medicines are not allowed to contain western medicinal ingredients controlled under the Poisons Act. These products are considered illegal products. Anyone found guilty of an offence under the Poisons Act is liable on conviction, of a fine of up to \$10,000 and/or imprisonment for a term of up to two years.

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- **About the Health Sciences Authority (HSA)**

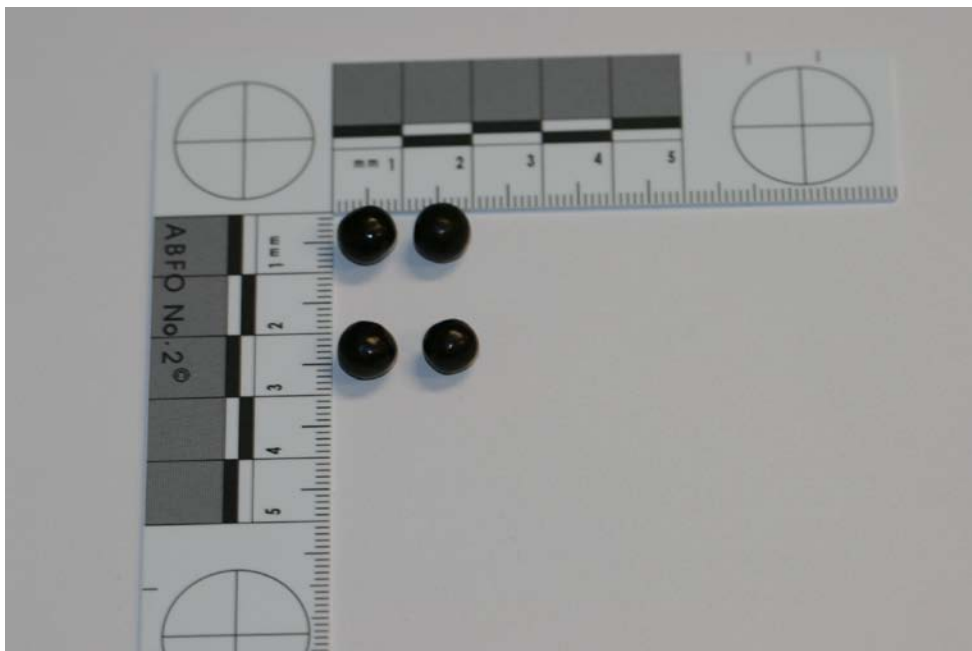
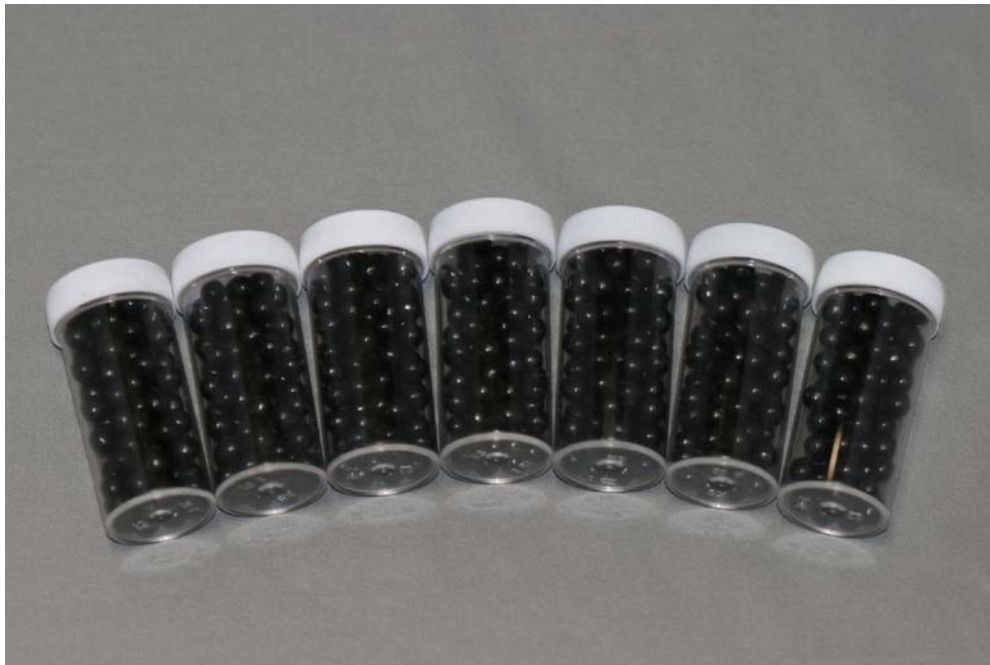
The Health Sciences Authority (HSA) is a multidisciplinary agency that applies medical, pharmaceutical and scientific expertise through its three professional groups, Health Products Regulation, Blood Services, Applied Sciences, to protect and advance national health and safety. It serves as the national regulator for health products, ensuring they are wisely regulated to meet standards of safety, quality and efficacy. It operates the national blood bank, Bloodbank@HSA, securing the nation's blood supply. It also applies specialised scientific, forensic, investigative and analytical capabilities in serving the administration of justice. For more details, visit www.hsa.gov.sg.

- **About HSA's Health Products Regulation Group**

The Health Products Regulation Group (HPRG) of HSA contributes to the development of biomedical sciences in Singapore by administering a robust, scientific and responsive regulatory framework. It ensures that drugs, innovative therapeutics, medical devices and health-related products are wisely regulated and meet appropriate safety, quality and efficacy standards.

HSA ALERTS PUBLIC TO HARMFUL “BLACK PILLS” TARGETED AT ELDERLY CONSUMERS

a) About the Product and the Adulterants



The unlabelled bottles of black pills have been promoted as a traditional remedy to relieve pain and for other medical conditions such as hypertension and high cholesterol.

The product is packaged in a clear plastic bottle (unlabelled) and contains approximately 100 black pills each.

b) The Adulterants

Dexamethasone is used medically for anti-inflammatory purposes (i.e. reduce swelling and inflammation). Unsupervised use of dexamethasone can cause increased blood glucose levels, high blood pressure, muscle damage, mental disorders and weak bones. Sudden withdrawal after prolonged use of dexamethasone can lead to serious outcomes such as muscle weakness and kidney failure. Chlorpheniramine is an antihistamine and may cause drowsiness, confusion and urinary retention.