

Foreign medicines sell like hot cakes in Pakistan

■ 'Psychiatric disorders on the rise in the country'

By Irfan Ghauri

ISLAMABAD: Multinational drug companies have picked Pakistan as a favourite spot for treating patients with mental and psychiatric disorders through the sale of expensive drugs, which serve only doctors and manufacturers while the patients get no relief despite conceding huge monetary losses, says a report.

The report launched by a civil society organisation, The Network, said the situation had further aggravated in the absence of effective rules and regulations on the sale and consumption of such drugs.

It said that annually psychotropic drug sale (allopathic only) in Pakistan was touching the figure of Rs 3 billion.

"For only one year (July 2003 to June 2004) the sales stood at Rs 2.76 billion (\$46.77 million). Of these, antidepressants' sale was worth Rs 821.17 million (\$13.4 million), tranquilizers and hypnotics Rs 1.36 billion (\$23.18 million) and antipsychotics Rs 377.02 million (\$6.39 million)."

Interestingly, sale of drugs categorised as 'nootropics' (so-called brain stimulants) was

worth Rs 187.6 million (\$3.18 million), the report said. To put the above figures in context, the Gross Domestic Product of the country is approximately \$61.6 billion whereas the per capita income is \$440.

According to the report, suicide rate has increased dramatically in the last few years from a few hundred to more than 3,000 annually. "Serious mental illness accounts for another 1-3 percent of the population. Health spending is a pitiable as only 1 percent of the annual budget is spent on it. There is no health insurance and a poorly funded public health service is accessed by only the poorest. Mental health services are almost nonexistent and limited to either psychiatry departments of teaching hospitals or privately clinics," the report said. According to the report, a multinational pharmaceutical company recently launched a drug for dementia in Pakistan and flew about 70 Pakistani doctors to Bangkok, Thailand for a three-night all-expenses-paid trip.

Dr Murad Musa Khan, a Psychiatry professor in Aga Khan University Karachi, in an article published in latest issue

of 'Watch on Medicine' writes "the pharmaceutical companies and physicians have a well-established symbiotic relationship in Pakistan, not unlike that in many other countries. However, with little or no regulation of medical practice or drug prescribing and dispensing, companies and physicians are free to act as they deem fit. Malpractice litigation against doctors is unheard of. Pharmaceutical companies have therefore targeted psychiatrists aggressively".

"Some of the many inducements for doctors include: sponsoring attendance at conferences, underwriting symposia, all-expenses-paid trips for family members and the doctor, free drug samples and expensive gifts (watches, air conditioners, briefcases, laptops, etc). Other methods include funding a physician's family wedding, holidays and other events of this nature. One of the latest incentives is for the pharmaceutical company to provide the physician with a down payment for a new car. All the physician has to do in return is write 200 prescriptions for the company's expensive drug," he said.