



CEDAR WAY VETERINARY CLINIC, LTD.
2041 CALISTOGA DRIVE NEW LENOX, IL 60451
815-462-PETS (7387) 815-462-4170 (fax)
www.cedarwayvet.com



Online Veterinary Pharmacies: Buyer Beware

By [Dr. Debora Lichtenberg, VMD](#) on July 25, 2012 -



The envelope that arrived at my home had a big, red “CONFIDENTIAL” stamped on it.

It was a letter from a “veterinary exports” company offering “top dollar” for diverted veterinary drugs. In other words, these folks are looking for veterinarians like me to purchase drugs for them and make a quick buck under the table, since they can’t get their own drugs legitimately.

The return address on this envelope looked familiar. The address was identical to one of the largest, most reputable online veterinary pharmacies in America. What was going on here? I get these faxes and letters, asking me to buy drugs and divert them, frequently. All veterinarians get them. They disgust me, because they’re asking me to do something that, in my opinion, is highly unethical. And I throw them out.

These offers come from the bottom feeders, companies in business just trying to buy a huge amount of inventory, not care about the handling of the drug or the relationship with the client, and sell as much of it as they can to online pharmacies to make a quick profit. This is called **gray market diversion**.

But why do I have such a bug in my bonnet about this particular letter? Because if the identical addresses mean this is indeed the same company, then a highly regarded, accredited online pharmacy is behaving in a very shady manner. It is trying to get veterinarians and veterinary staff to divert products its way.

If it is so reputable, why can't it get its OWN drugs?

(I would tell you the name of the pharmacy, but I have once before been sent a threatening cease-and-desist letter to my home, for a previous article. Why should this major online pharmacy be concerned about little old me? They have been sued and settled many lawsuits for millions of dollars because of their shady business practices.)

What Is Diversion? What Is the Gray Market?

When a product is diverted, it means that a company has obtained that product in an unauthorized manner. It means the company (an online pharmacy, for example) cannot get that product, or enough of that product directly, through authorized channels, so it pays other entities to get that product for it.

Whenever a product is diverted, meaning procured through unauthorized channels, its safety and its integrity can be compromised.

Usually, online pharmacies have the products diverted through a "wholesaler" or "distributor," in this case the "export" company with the same address as the online pharmacy. It's a gray market, not quite a black market, because it's not quite illegal.

But there's nothing clean about it. It's a murky shade of gray. Like old duck poop on a hot dock (that's what I'm staring at as I write

this; I'm on vacation). Disgusting.

Even if you have a legitimate prescription from your veterinarian, depending on where you get that scrip filled, if you choose to go online you may be buying a diverted product unknowingly:

- How did the pharmacy get the product?
- Who bought and sold the product?
- How long did it sit in someone's garage at subzero temps?
- Or did it boil for a month or two in a Sunshine State warehouse?
- Was it in one UPS truck, or four? And for how long?
- Why couldn't that pharmacy get the product legitimately?

It's all very murky, indeed.

Say you've done your homework and checked out the FDA's website, warning you about the perils of buying from online veterinary pharmacies. They want you to make sure the pharmacy you're buying from is accredited. It has the Vet-VIPPS

accreditation, so you think everything is above board, right?

WRONG. Hundreds of veterinarians are getting offers like the one I described, offering to pay "top dollar" for our "excess inventory," and sell it to diverters. This is not what VIPPS accreditation had in mind.

What products was this company most interested in this time? Heartgard Plus and Nexgard. In the past, it's been Frontline flea and tick medications. Tons has been written about Frontline diversion. That's old news. Is Frontline supposed to be sold only through veterinarians? Yes. We are the ones who educated you about the product and taught you how to use it safely and effectively.

If you have a problem with Frontline, does the online pharmacy (or Amazon.com, or Costco) have the manufacturer's guarantee?

Not according to the manufacturer!

But Frontline is not a prescription med like Nexgard and Heartgard Plus. Diversion of *prescription* drugs, I believe, is a more serious ethical issue.

When you get your prescription from your vet for Heartgard Plus

or Nexgard, for example, and you have it filled online, did you know that you may be buying diverted medicine, that there may have been no safe chain of custody, and that you have no guarantee of the integrity of that medicine?

I didn't think the online pharmacy business for prescription medicine was this shaky.

But that was for a pocketbook. Is this diversion of veterinary pharmaceuticals the same kind of thing? No. **This is much more serious. We're talking about your pet's health and safety.** You don't want to cut a backdoor deal when it comes to medications.

This is my opinion, but I do not believe any guarantee from an online pharmacy or a big box store can compare with the guarantee you can get from your veterinarian for veterinary products and prescriptions.

I cannot tell you what 0-666-DeadMeds will do for you if your dog gets heartworm after getting your Rx from them. And have you asked the pharmacist at the Walmart what he or she knows about the veterinary products there? I have. It's scary.

What I can tell you, with confidence, is that when a pet owner has purchased a product legitimately from a veterinarian, and has a complaint or product failure, the veterinarian and the company has that pet owner's back. The pet's safety and the efficacy of the product are of the utmost importance to them.

Merial has paid for in-home flea treatments when clients claim their Frontline "didn't work." They have also paid for additional wormers when an intestinal parasite problem was not eradicated. And they will pay for heartworm treatment if you purchased the proper heartworm medication from your vet and your dog gets heartworm. Even if I believe the client may have made a mistake or may have been at fault, these companies stand behind their guarantees.

If you want to invest in one of these online pharmacies, read the fine print first. I easily found this statement in the SEC filings of one of the biggest online pharmacies:

“We currently purchase a portion of our prescription and non-prescription medications from third party distributors and we are not an authorized distributor of these products.”

For the visually minded, here is the actual excerpt, lifted straight from the report:

...the majority of our sales of prescription medications and non-prescription medications are from third party distributors and we are not an authorized distributor of these products. Our supply of these products conducted could be in jeopardy.

We currently purchase a portion of our prescription and non-prescription medications from third party distributors and we are not an authorized distributor of these products. We do not have any guaranteed supply of medications at any pre-established prices.

The majority of our sales were attributable to sales of prescription and non-prescription medications.