



Persatuan Pengguna Pulau Pinang Consumers Association of Penang

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Letter to Editor

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Free drugs not really free

The Consumers Association of Penang commends the Ministry of Health in conducting a review of the Patient Access Scheme to ensure it is in line with proper audit and procurement standards.

The scheme operates on the basis of getting certain drugs free upon purchase of a certain amount of drugs. In essence this is 'not free' and cannot be deemed as an access program as its availability is tagged against volume purchase of certain drugs. Products can be deemed free only when they are independent of any purchase and given in the genuine interest of patient health.

In fact this practice of bundling products against a purchase can also be seen as a bribe to induce the purchase of certain drugs. The fact that these 'supposedly' free drugs are given directly to doctors is another 'red flag'. Would they be given to a poor patient or an influential patient?

CAP acknowledges that treatment of some life-threatening and rare diseases is expensive and as such has long advocated for 'price control' on drugs to enable access to patients. There are also flexibilities within our legal framework such as government –use license and compulsory license that allows for purchase of cheaper versions of the same drugs thereby enabling access to anyone who needs the drug.

It is the government through the Ministry of Health that is the custodian of public health and should take whatever legal measures available to enable access to medicines for the rakyat. The multinational pharmaceutical industry only has profits in mind and programs such as these patient assistance schemes are nothing more than social marketing schemes that help to push sales of certain products.

We also need to be wary of 'think-tanks' that act as voice-pieces for the multinational pharmaceutical industry under the guise of 'public interest'. Nothing could be worse for patients.

CAP once again appeals to the Ministry of Health to implement price control on pharmaceutical drugs urgently. The absence of price control has led to the present situation where 'access' is tied to volume purchases.

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