

# Putting too much trust in influencers

## Supplement buyers easily swayed by social media, online sellers

By **TEH ATHIRA YUSOF**  
tehathirayusof@thestar.com.my

**PETALING JAYA:** Many consumers, particularly the elderly, are putting their health at risk by buying supplements online after being swayed by social media influencers and online sellers.

For some, the consequences are already apparent.

Sam Ahmad, 37, recently discovered that his diabetic mother, in her 60s, had purchased an immunity-boosting supplement promoted on a social media platform, only to suffer stomach pain weeks later.

"She told me she wanted to strengthen her immune system.

"She saw celebrities and influencers promoting the product and felt that it was probably genuine. So my mother wanted to try it," the private sector employee said.

He said the seller did not ask about his mother's medical history before selling the product.

"My mother said the person never asked her anything and that she was convinced the supplement would not affect her health," he added.

A few weeks after taking the supplement, Sam's mother began experiencing abdominal pain, prompting her family to take her to a clinic, where the doctor explained that some herbal or high-dose vitamin formulations could irritate the stomach or interact with diabetes medication.

In another case, human resources manager Rianne Hani Muhd, 42, was shocked to learn that her father had purchased a collagen-type supplement through a chat group after seeing a group of celebrities promoting the product.

She said the bottle has no MAL number – a registration number for pharmaceutical products approved by the Health Ministry – or FarmaTag, a security hologram indicating the authenticity of registered medicines and supplements in Malaysia.

"I asked him why he trusted the seller, and he said his friends have been purchasing from this person, who seems to be very popular online.

"Thankfully, he has yet to consume the supplement," she added.

She said more must be done to protect

consumers, especially seniors who may not know how to verify a supplement's approval status.

"I hope the ministry can vet these online promoters or at least make it easier for the public to confirm whether a product is approved.

"It is quite frustrating that people are now abusing social media platforms to lure those who wish to improve their health.

"Nowadays, the perception is that when one thing is 'viral', it is considered safe. Something must be done to curb this before somebody gets sick," she added.

Currently, Malaysia requires that all health supplements be registered with the National Pharmaceutical Regulatory Agency (NPRA) before they can be sold.

Consumers can check the legitimacy of a product through the agency's portal, its Product Status mobile application or scan the FarmaTag using the FarmaChecker app.

Suspicious or unregistered products can be reported to NPRA via its online complaint system or through the Health Ministry's pharmacy enforcement channels.

### Countries regulating influencer advice on subjects such as health and finance



#### ■ Malaysia

Under the new Securities Commission (SC) regulations, "finfluencers" (financial influencers) must be licensed or registered. Unlicensed advice could lead to fines of up to **RM10mil or 10 years' jail**.

The Health Ministry has warned social media sellers against using TikTok Live and other platforms to promote unregistered medicines.

#### ■ China

Requires influencers discussing serious topics like medicine, finance or law to have verified professional qualifications like a relevant degree or license.

#### ■ United Kingdom

The Financial Conduct Authority (FCA) requires influencers or promoters who talk about financial products to comply with strict financial promotion rules.

#### ■ United States

The Federal Trade Commission (FTC) mandates clear disclosures for sponsored content and enforces truth-in-advertising rules. Influencers giving financial or health-related endorsements must comply.

#### ■ Singapore

The Monetary Authority of Singapore (MAS) has issued guidance on responsible online financial content. Influencers connected to licensed financial firms are subject to conduct and disclosure rules.

#### ■ Australia

The Australian Securities & Investments Commission (ASIC) monitors "finfluencers" and warns that giving financial advice may require licensing – even for online creators.

#### ■ India

The Advertising Standards Council of India (ASCI) has tightened guidelines for influencers promoting health or finance products. These include the requirement for proper disclosures and, where applicable, relevant qualifications.

The Star graphics

## Experts call for better checks and balances

**KUALA LUMPUR:** Health experts are calling for stronger transparency as unapproved health products continue to be promoted by social media influencers.

Rather than enforcing strict degree requirements for influencers as China has done, experts suggest clear disclosures and strategic placement of Health Ministry-approved labels to curb misinformation and protect the public.

The Chinese government recently passed a new law requiring influencers to hold degrees if they wish to discuss topics such as health, medicine, finance, law or education.

This step is reportedly aimed at combating misinformation and protecting the public.

Prof Dr Sharifa Ezat Wan Puteh, a public health medicine specialist and lecturer at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, said the solution lies not in banning people from speaking but in requiring disclosure of affiliations with NGOs, government bodies or sponsors.

She said social media is difficult to regulate, allowing misinformation to spread.

"Whatever influencers mention might lead to public misinformation that could cause ill effects, such as reduced herd immunity or fuelling anti-vaccine sentiment," she said.

Prof Sharifa also warned of serious health risks from unregulated diet pills, including liver, kidney and nervous system damage, insomnia and rebound weight gain.

Prof Dr Jamalludin Ab Rahman, director at International Islamic University Malaysia's Kuantan campus, noted that

unapproved supplements may contain toxins or interact with medicines, posing dangers to the elderly, pregnant women and those with underlying conditions.

While requiring influencers to hold degrees could increase accountability, he said it may silence legitimate educators.

"It is better to target clinical advice and commercial promotions rather than general wellness comments. We need to empower the public to share the responsibility of educating others as well, but within scope and not to act like an expert," he said.

The public health medicine specialist called for prominent, standardised labelling linked to the National Pharmaceutical Regulatory Agency or Health Ministry, supported by enforcement and long-term public education.

"We can run digital-literacy campaigns, even in schools, on how to evaluate social media information.

"Whether from an expert or not, information must be evidence-based, and it is very important that there should be no conflict of interest," Dr Jamalludin added.

Retired Health Ministry director Datuk Dr Zainal Ariffin Omar urged immediate prioritisation of clearer regulations on product promotion on social media, warning that unapproved products may contain hidden steroids or banned substances that can seriously harm health.

"They are not tested for safety or effectiveness like proper medicine. It is a waste of money and poses serious health risks when left untested by the right authorities," he said, adding that bad health advice spreads like a virus online.

"When people follow it, they can delay

proper medical treatment, leading to worse health outcomes. It erodes public trust in real science and healthcare professionals.

"Malaysia could emulate China's move, but full verification may be difficult to enforce. A more feasible first step is a strong focus on mandatory Health Ministry approval for any health product being advertised."

Independent health advocate Dr Sean Thum stressed that the public also bears responsibility.

In Malaysia, he pointed out, some influencers promote unlicensed products or "miracle cures", and such posts attract thousands of views and comments, especially when they play on emotions such as fear, hope or shame.

"A study from Australia found that more than 87% of health-related influencer posts only highlighted benefits of medical tests or treatments, while fewer than 10% cited credible scientific evidence.

"When such content goes viral, it can distort people's understanding of health and lead to poor decisions about their bodies and well-being," he said.

Dr Thum recommended a transparent framework requiring creators to declare credentials and commercial interests, alongside stricter moderation of misleading content on social media platforms.

On Nov 20, the Health Ministry announced it had issued RM120mil in compounds for offences involving unregistered medicines, under Regulation 7(1)(a) of the Control of Drugs and Cosmetics Regulations 1984, as part of efforts to combat illicit products online.

## Pulau Aman residents to enjoy desalinated water next year

By **N. TRISHA**  
trishang@thestar.com.my

**NIBONG TEBAL:** A RM3.81mil pilot desalination plant on Pulau Aman is taking shape, with 26.61% of the works done.

Penang Water Supply Corporation (PBAPP) chief executive officer Datuk K. Pathmanathan said the project is due for comple-

tion on June 15 next year to serve 94 consumer accounts, or about 200 people, on the island.

The plant will have a treatment capacity of 0.24 million litres per day using reverse osmosis (RO) technology.

Desalination plants using RO typically draw seawater through intake screens, remove suspended particles with pre-treatment

filters, then force the water through semi-permeable membranes under high pressure.

These membranes block salt and most dissolved minerals, producing fresh water, while generating a brine stream that is far more concentrated than seawater as leftover.

Operators usually manage this brine through controlled outfalls

or mixing systems to prevent localised harm to marine habitats.

The island's earlier desalination plant was completed in 2019, but failed to meet safety limits for boron and total dissolved solids.

PBAPP later put in new engineering plans, and construction restarted on June 16 this year.

Pathmanathan said the aim is to build and run a fully functional

plant to produce quality treated water, and to train PBAPP personnel in the desalination operation.

He said desalination can supplement Penang's water security, but the operation cost is high.

"It's about 10 times higher than conventional treatment, but PBAPP will absorb it. Pulau Aman residents will continue paying the normal tariff," he said.