



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

**HEALTH SCIENCES AUTHORITY
PRESS RELEASE
12 JULY 2012**

HSA ALERTS PUBLIC TO ILLEGAL AND ADULTERATED CAPSULES THAT HAVE CAUSED SERIOUS ADVERSE REACTIONS

The Health Sciences Authority (HSA) alerts members of the public to illegal capsules that are being sold as herbal or traditional medicines to treat arthritic and joint pain, and promote blood circulation. To-date, two patients have suffered serious adverse reactions, one of whom was admitted to the Intensive Care Unit (ICU) after taking these capsules. Samples of these capsules were tested and found to contain an undeclared potent western medicine, dexamethasone. These capsules are also not adequately labelled and are not approved by HSA.

2 Three different case reports on these illegal capsules have been reported to HSA's Vigilance Branch. Investigations by HSA officers revealed that the capsules were bought from peddlers or from friends. The officers also detected that the implicated capsules appeared similar in presentation, which were either green-white or blue-white in colour, and packaged in transparent bottles. The label that comes with these capsules is presented as a slip of paper with a printed list of herbal ingredients (see [Annex](#) for pictures and table of ingredients). Further investigations revealed that they were likely to be the same product.

3 Tests done at HSA's Pharmaceutical Laboratory confirmed that these capsules were adulterated with the same potent western medicine, dexamethasone. Dexamethasone is a very potent steroid used for anti-inflammatory purposes and should only be taken under strict supervision by doctors. It can cause serious adverse effects such as increased blood glucose leading to diabetes, high blood pressure, eye, muscular and bone disorders, and can cause serious symptoms upon withdrawal (more information on the adverse effects caused by steroids and withdrawal symptoms can be found in the [Annex](#)). As such, members of the public who have consumed the above-mentioned coloured capsules should consult a doctor as soon as possible.

Case reports

4 The reported cases involved patients between 40 and 80 years of age. The patient who was in critical condition is a male in his 80s who bought the capsules from a peddler locally. He was diagnosed by a doctor to have developed serious complications of ¹Cushing's syndrome after consuming the adulterated capsules for

¹ Please refer to [Annex](#) for a description of Cushing's syndrome.

about one year for the relief of chronic back pain. He was warded in the ICU for complications resulting from chronic unsupervised steroid consumption.

5 The second patient, in his 40s, took the capsules which he purchased from his friend for pain relief of gout. As a consequence of long term consumption of the adulterated capsules, his bones were affected and he sustained a fracture requiring surgery.

6 The third case involved a female in her 50s who experienced rapid pain relief for her stiff neck after consuming only a few of the illegal capsules, which were obtained from a friend. Her family member immediately suspected that the product was adulterated and reported the case to HSA.

Public Advisory

7 Members of the public who have consumed the above illegal capsules should consult their doctors as soon as possible and not stop taking the product on their own to avoid symptoms of steroid withdrawal.

8 Associate Professor Chan Cheng Leng, Deputy Group Director of the Health Products Regulation Group, HSA says, "We are very concerned that there may be more cases of consumers who are taking these products that are unreported and who may not be aware of its serious consequences. Traditional or herbal medicines that claim to offer quick relief of chronic conditions such as back and joint pain, especially if they are poorly labelled or packaged often contain potent medicinal ingredients such as steroids. Consumption of steroids, such as dexamethasone, without medical supervision, can lead to very serious adverse effects."

9 HSA takes a serious view against those engaged in the sale and supply of illegal health products and will take strong enforcement action against such persons. It is an offence for an unlicensed person to import, sell or possess for sale any product containing substances controlled under the Poisons Act, such as dexamethasone. Anyone found guilty of an offence under the Poisons Act is liable to a fine of up to \$10,000 and/or imprisonment for a term of up to two years.

10 Members of the public who have encountered these illegal products or any other suspicious products are encouraged to report them to the Enforcement Branch of HSA at Tel: 6866 3485 or Email: hsa_is@hsa.gov.sg.

11 For updates on public health and safety matters, members of the public may also follow HSA at www.twitter.com/HSAsg.

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

The Health Sciences Authority (HSA) 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. HSA is a multidisciplinary authority. It serves as the national regulator for health products, ensuring they are wisely regulated to meet standards of safety, quality and efficacy. As the national blood service, it is responsible for providing a safe and adequate blood supply. It also applies specialised scientific, forensic, investigative and analytical capabilities in serving the administration of justice. For more details, visit <http://www.hsa.gov.sg/>.

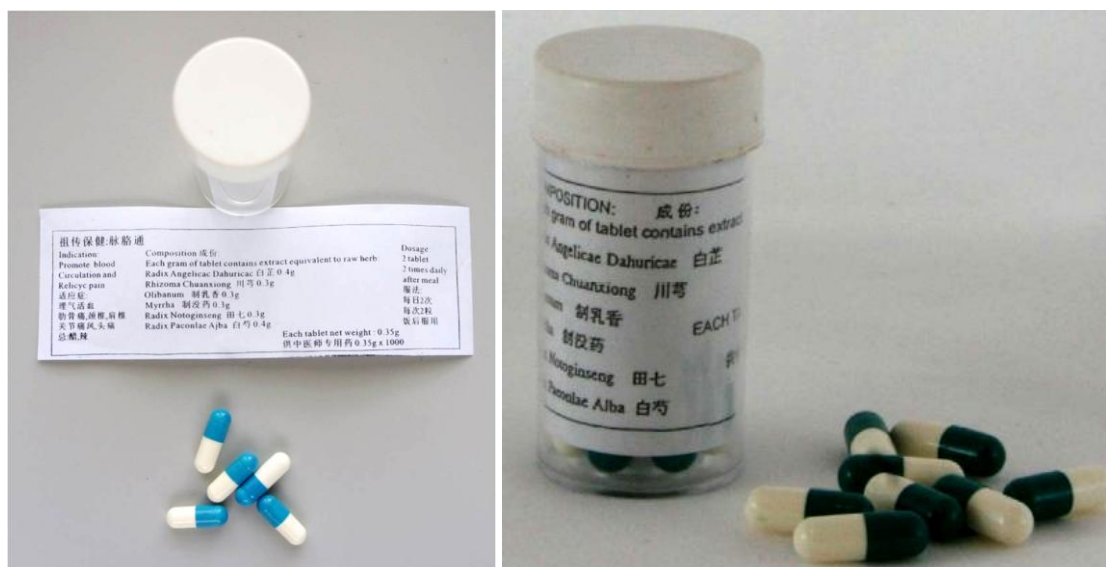
For more updates on public health and safety matters, follow us on Twitter at www.twitter.com/HSAsg.

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

The Health Products Regulation Group (HPRG) of HSA ensures that drugs, innovative therapeutics, medical devices and health-related products are wisely regulated and meet appropriate safety, quality and efficacy standards.

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Pictures of the illegal capsules with the printed insert



List of ingredients on the printed insert of the product

Product	Zu Chuan Bao Jian: Mai Luo Tong
Description/Name :	
Indication:	Promote blood circulation and relieve pain
Dosage:	2 tablet 2 times daily after meal
Packing:	Loose capsules in clear plastic container
Composition (as printed on insert):	Each gram of tablet contains extract equivalent to raw herb: Radix Angelicac Dahuricac 0.4g Rhizoma Chuanxiong 0.3g Olibanum 0.3g Myrrha 0.3g Radix Notoginseng 0.3g Radix Paeoniae Ajba 0.4g
Net weight per tablet:	0.35g

名称	祖传保健：脉络通
功能与主治：	理气活血，筋骨痛，颈椎，肩椎，关节痛风，头痛
服法与用量：	每日2次，每次2粒，饭后服用
包装：	胶囊，包装在透明塑料罐子里
成分：	白芷0.4g 川芎0.3g 制乳香0.3g 制没药 0.3g 田七 0.3g 白芍 0.4个

Adverse effects caused by dexamethasone and withdrawal symptoms

Dexamethasone is a very potent steroid and is used for anti-inflammatory purposes (i.e. reduce pain and swelling). Unsupervised long-term use of dexamethasone can cause increased blood glucose levels leading to diabetes, high blood pressure, cataracts, muscular and bone disorders, and an increased risk of infections. Long term use of dexamethasone can also lead to ¹Cushing's syndrome, a disorder that occurs when a person's body is exposed to high levels of steroid hormones. This condition is characterised by a round face or 'moon face', and upper body obesity with thin arms and legs.

Patients who have taken high doses of steroids over a prolonged period of time may also suffer from withdrawal symptoms if the steroid consumption is stopped suddenly. Steroid withdrawal symptoms include weakness, fatigue, weight loss, nausea, diarrhea, low blood pressure, joint pain and bowel obstruction due to the slowing down of intestinal contractions. Medical supervision is required to prevent steroid withdrawal when stopping steroid therapy in patients who have consumed high doses of steroids over a prolonged period of time.