

Why AI, Counterfeit Medicines, and Fake Trust Signals Are Creating a Clone Pharmacy Crisis

These days, a patient searching online for weight management treatment might come across two websites that look equally legitimate. One may belong to a regulated pharmacy, while the other may be a criminal imitation. This is a real risk for people accessing healthcare online because many patients cannot easily tell the difference between a licensed provider and a cloned site designed to exploit their trust.

That risk is growing as criminals increasingly copy online pharmacy websites, social media accounts, regulator logos, and even health advice content in order to sell counterfeit weight loss medicines. The scale of the problem is significant, with the National Pharmacy Association (NPA) reporting that one in 10 online pharmacies has had its website or social media presence cloned to trick patients into buying counterfeit weight loss medication.¹

It is important not to lose sight of what legitimate online pharmacies can offer when they are properly regulated. They can be safe, clinically governed, and accessible, and they play a vital role in widening access to care when they operate within the right regulatory and clinical frameworks. The challenge now is that the same digital environment that makes healthcare more convenient also makes it easier for criminals to mimic trusted providers. That leaves the sector with a clear question, which is how to make safe, regulated care easier for patients to recognise.

The Black Market Has Moved On

The black market for medicines is increasingly presented through search results, social media posts, private messages, and websites designed to look professional, when they are in fact cloned.

This is also growing into public discourse around next-generation incretin medicines, including investigational treatments such as retatrutide – better understood as a triple hormone receptor agonist still under clinical investigation, rather than as a medicine currently available through routine prescribing.

As public awareness grows around future medicines before they are approved or legally available outside clinical trials, criminals may see an opportunity to exploit demand before patients understand what is legitimate.

One patient reportedly bought a counterfeit Mounjaro pen from a site posing as a pharmacy for a quarter of the market price.² Another received a GLP-1 medicine labelled for another patient and sent without a needle. At the same time, interest in retatrutide shows how quickly demand can form around medicines before they are available through lawful, regulated routes.

From a pharmacist's perspective, this is where the risk becomes acute. The website may look credible, the branding may appear familiar, and the advice may sound similar to regulated health information. However, none of that proves there is a pharmacist assessing suitability, monitoring dose progression, or taking responsibility for the patient's care.

That makes this a trust issue for the whole online pharmacy sector. As demand spreads from current weight-management medicines to future treatments still under investigation, patients need clearer ways to distinguish regulated healthcare from criminal imitation.

AI Is Accelerating the Problem

The story of medical fraud existed long before generative AI. Counterfeiters and illegal sellers have always used moments of high demand to exploit vulnerable or hopeful patients. What has changed is the speed, scale, and sophistication with which imitation can now happen.

AI-enabled tools can make cloned websites, copied advice, and false identities faster, cheaper, and more convincing to produce. The National Cyber Security Centre (NCSC) has assessed that AI will almost certainly make cyber intrusion operations more effective and efficient.³ The NCSC has also said cyber threat actors are already using AI to enhance tactics, including reconnaissance, social engineering and exploitation.

For online pharmacies, this means a criminal can replicate the surface of a trusted

service – imitating visual identity, tone of voice, educational content, and trust markers – without any of the clinical governance behind it.

While a cloned site may look reassuring and safe, it does not have the prescribing checks, pharmacist oversight, patient records, or accountability that make online care safe. This risk is already present in the market, with the NPA reporting that one in 10 online pharmacies has seen its website or social media presence cloned by criminals.

As the fake front door becomes more convincing, it becomes more important that legitimate providers make verification, clinical process, and regulatory status clear.

Patients should not be expected to navigate this alone. If criminal sites are becoming more sophisticated, the response from regulated providers must also become clearer. Safety in our industry must be visible, understandable and easy for patients to verify.

Counterfeit Medicines Are Not Cheaper Versions of the Same Treatment

In a market where legitimate private weight-management treatment has faced price rises and supply pressures, unusually cheap offers can appear attractive to patients. Reuters reported that Eli Lilly increased the UK list price of Mounjaro from September 2025, with the highest monthly dose rising from £122 to £330.4 When demand is high and costs rise, patients may be more likely to search for cheaper routes. The problem is that illegally supplied medicines are medicines supplied outside the clinical, regulatory and safety framework that protects patients.

Patients have been warned that products sold illegally may be fake, contaminated, incorrectly dosed, or contain powerful undisclosed ingredients.⁵ People have also been advised not to buy prescription-only medicines without a prescription and to avoid weight-loss products promoted through social media, especially those offering quick fixes or unusually low prices.

A GLP-1 medicine can be used safely and appropriately when it sits within a clinical

framework, which includes suitability checks, medical history, contraindications, dose escalation, side-effect monitoring, storage conditions and follow-up.

The worry is the possibility that a medicine may be counterfeit and the absence of a clinical framework around it. Without those safeguards, patients may face risks they cannot see at the point of purchase.

A product may arrive in packaging that appears convincing, be described using familiar brand names, or be sold by a site that looks professional. But if it has not been supplied through a regulated clinical pathway, the patient cannot know whether the medicine is genuine, suitable, correctly dosed, or safe for them.

Price should never be the only signal a patient uses when making decisions about prescription-only medication. If an offer looks unusually cheap, the more important question is not how much money it saves, but what safety checks have been removed to make that price possible.

Safe Online Pharmacies Are Defined by Process

A legitimate online pharmacy should be judged by the safety processes behind the service.

Patients should expect registration checks, a proper face-to-face or video call consultation, identity verification, clinical eligibility review, and independent verification where required. They should also expect pharmacist oversight, clear prescribing records, safe supply, and accessible aftercare.

The General Pharmaceutical Council (GPhC) strengthened safeguards for online pharmacy services in 2025 to help prevent people from receiving medicines that are not clinically appropriate and could cause harm.⁶ This reflects a wider reality in digital healthcare, and convenience must not come at the expense of clinical judgement.

In pharmacy, safety often sits in the questions patients are asked before a medicine is supplied. Those questions may feel inconvenient, but they are there for a reason.

If a provider asks for the right information, declines treatment where appropriate or requires follow-up, it is not creating friction for its own sake; it is applying clinical governance.

This can be difficult in a consumer environment where speed is often treated as a measure of service quality, but healthcare is

different. The safest providers check whether treatment is appropriate, explain the risks, monitor the patient and have a clear route for support if something changes.

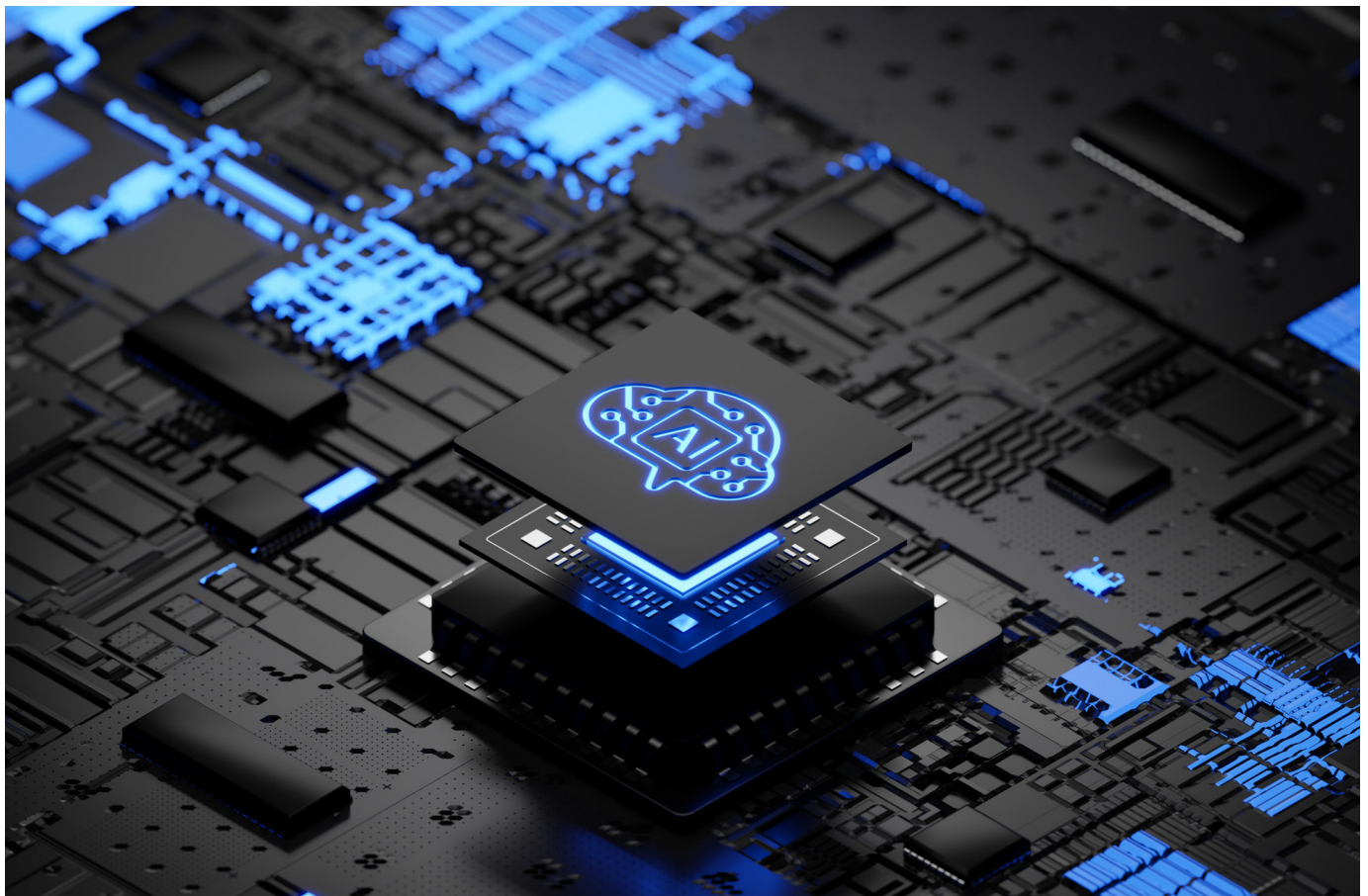
This is especially important for weight-management medicines, as treatment involves clinical assessment, ongoing monitoring and careful dose progression. If a provider does not ask meaningful questions, does not verify information or does not offer follow-up, that should raise concern rather than reassurance.

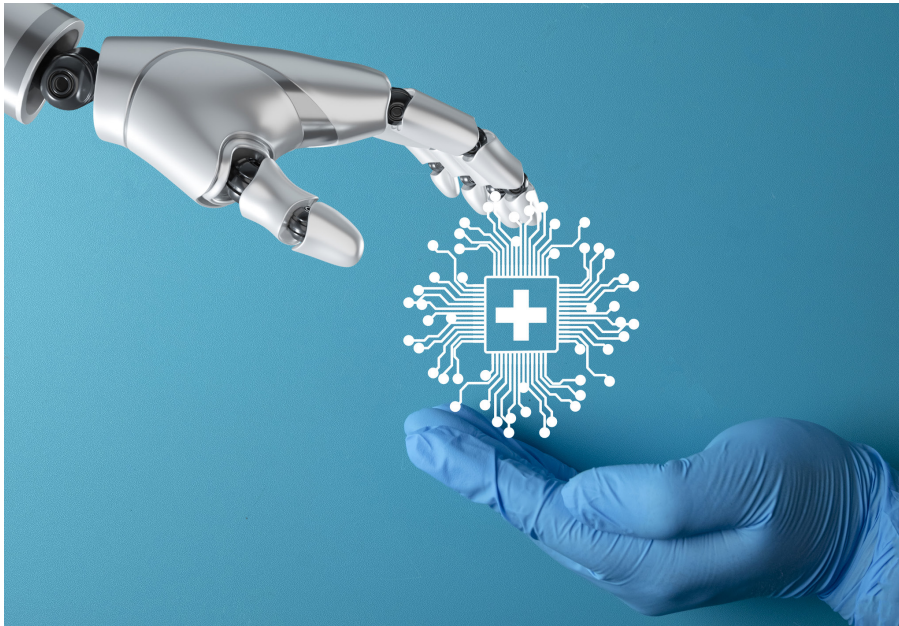
A Responsible Online Pharmacy Must Make Safety Easier to Recognise

The sector has a responsibility to move itself away from unsafe providers without implying that all online pharmacies are unsafe.

Criminals cloning online pharmacy websites and selling counterfeit medicines create a major patient safety risk. But that does not mean a regulated online pharmacy is the problem. Safe digital healthcare can improve access, support patients, and deliver clinically governed care when it operates transparently and responsibly.

The GPhC has described the sale of counterfeit medicines through fake online pharmacies or social media platforms as a





major threat to patient safety. The regulator has also called for collaboration across regulators, government and stakeholders to help people safely access legitimate online pharmacies.

Patients are interacting with pharmacy websites and encountering medicines through search, social platforms, paid advertising, private messages and shared content. The places where patients discover health information are often the same places where unsafe sellers can reach them.

Digital healthcare must be transparent, clinically led and easy to verify. Providers have to show how they operate, not simply state that they are safe. That means making regulatory status clear, explaining the clinical process, showing what checks patients should expect and being open about why some patients may not be suitable for treatment.

Trust cannot be built through reassurance alone; it has to be built through visible standards.

What Should Patients Check Before Buying Weight-Management Medicines Online?

Patients need practical, simple checks that help them pause before purchasing. No checklist can remove every risk, but there are clear warning signs that should prompt caution.

1. Check that the online pharmacy is registered with the GPhC.
2. Treat unusually low prices as a warning sign, particularly where prescription-

only medicines are being offered without a proper consultation.

3. Avoid sellers operating through social media, private messages, or pressured discounts. These routes can make it harder to verify who is supplying the medicine, whether the product is genuine and whether there is any clinical oversight.
4. Look for clear clinical information. A safe provider should explain who may be suitable, who may not be suitable, what checks are needed, what side effects may occur and how patients can access support.
5. Make sure there is a clear route to pharmacist support and follow-up. If a patient cannot easily understand who is responsible for their care after purchase, that should raise concern.

The safest online pharmacy experience is the one where the patient understands the process, the provider can verify suitability, and support is available throughout treatment.

The Future of Online Pharmacy Depends on Visible and Verifiable Trust

The next phase of online healthcare will be judged by how well it protects patients from both clinical risk and digital deception.

The image of the cloned pharmacy captures the challenge clearly. A website may look right, use the right language and borrow the right trust signals. But if it lacks clinical governance, regulatory accountability and patient safeguards, it is not safe care.

As online healthcare continues to grow, the sector must make legitimate care easier to identify. Regulators, platforms and pharmacy providers all have a role to play in helping patients understand what a safe supply looks like. Patients should be supported to ask better questions before purchasing, but they should not be left to solve digital deception alone.

Online pharmacies have an important role in modern healthcare. They can provide accessible, clinically governed services for patients who need support. But trust must be earned through transparent standards, responsible prescribing and ongoing patient care.

In a market where criminals can copy the appearance of safety, regulated providers need to make real safety impossible to miss.

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