



Pfizer accused of ‘bringing discredit’ on pharmaceutical industry after Covid social media posts

Watchdog rules company breached regulatory code five times including promoting unlicensed medicines

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Pfizer has been accused by the UK’s pharmaceutical watchdog of “bringing discredit” on the industry after senior executives used social media to promote an “unlicensed” Covid

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A ruling by the pharmaceutical watchdog, the Prescription Medicines Code of Practice Authority (PMCPA), relates to a complaint about a message posted on X, formerly known as Twitter, in November 2020 by senior Pfizer employees.

The complaint raised concern about Pfizer's "misuse of social media to misleadingly and illegally promote their Covid vaccine", according to the ruling.

They claimed that such "misbehaviour" on social media was "even more widespread" than they had thought and "extended right to the top of their UK operation".

'Unlicensed medicine proactively disseminated'

The complaint centred on a social media post on X by Dr Berkeley Phillips, the medical director of Pfizer UK. He shared a post from an employee of Pfizer in the US which said: "Our vaccine candidate is 95 per cent effective in preventing Covid-19, and 94 per cent effective in people over 65 years old. We will file all of our data with health authorities within days. Thank you to every volunteer in our trial, and to all who are tirelessly fighting this pandemic."

Four other Pfizer employees, including one "senior" colleague, published the same message

The PMCPA ruling noted that this message contained "limited" information about the vaccine's efficacy, no safety information and no reference to adverse events.

It went on to say that the social media post resulted in an "unlicensed medicine being proactively disseminated on Twitter to health professions and members of the public in the UK".

A Pfizer UK spokesman said that the company "fully recognises and accepts the issues highlighted by this PMCPA ruling", adding that it is "deeply sorry".

They said: "Pfizer UK has a comprehensive policy on personal use of social media in relation to Pfizer's business which prohibits colleagues from interacting with any social media related to Pfizer's medicines and vaccines – backed by staff briefings and training.

“The personal use of social media by UK pharmaceutical industry employees in relation to company business is a challenging area for pharmaceutical companies, in which we continue to take all of the appropriate steps that are reasonably expected of a pharmaceutical company.”

As part of their response to the ruling, Pfizer said it had launched a review into its employees’ use of social media platforms to ensure compliance with their own rules as well as the regulatory code.

‘Accidental and unintentional’

It is the sixth time Pfizer has been reprimanded by the regulator over its promotion of the Covid-19 vaccine.

One ruling by the watchdog, from November 2022, found that Pfizer’s chief executive made “misleading” statements about children’s vaccines.

Following a complaint from the campaign group UsForThem, the PMCPA found that Pfizer had misled the public, made unsubstantiated claims and failed to present information in a balanced way.

Three of the other Pfizer cases related to LinkedIn posts, one related one was about claims made in a press release and one was about posts on X.

For the most recent series of breaches, Pfizer was charged administrative costs of £34,800.

Ben Kingsley, the head of legal affairs at UsForThem, said: “It’s astonishing how many times Pfizer’s senior executives have been found guilty of serious regulatory offences – in this case including the most serious offence of all under the UK Code of Practice.

“Yet the consequences for Pfizer and the individuals concerned continue to be derisory. This hopeless system of regulation for a multi-billion dollar life and death industry has become a sham, in dire need of reform.”

Dr Phillips, the UK country medical director for Pfizer, said the social media post was “accidental and unintentional” adding: “That said, we immediately accepted the case ruling and do everything we can to ensure that our employees adhere to our strict social media policy and the industry Code of Practice when using their personal social media.”

David Watson of the Association of the British Pharmaceutical Industry (ABPI) said that the code of practice, which is overseen by the PMCPA, sets “high standards for companies that reflect and go beyond UK law”.

He added that cases that are found to have brought discredit on the industry are advertised in the medical, pharmaceutical, and nursing press.

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