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MONTHLY PHARMA NEWS KARACHI

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Millions Remain at Risk as Pakistan Continues Struggle Against Hepatitis

KARACHI: Despite ongoing efforts to eliminate hepatitis and repeated commitments towards a "Hepatitis-Free Pakistan", the disease continues to pose a major public health challenge, with millions of people still vulnerable to infection and many patients remaining undiagnosed or untreated. Health experts say that while significant progress has been made in the diagnosis and treatment of hepatitis in recent years, persistent challenges including unsafe injection practices, inadequate infection-control measures, substandard medical products and limited public awareness continue to hamper efforts to curb the spread of the disease. Pakistan has long been regarded as one of the countries carrying a substantial burden of hepatitis C. According to medical professionals, advances in antiviral therapies have transformed treatment outcomes, with modern medicines enabling many patients to achieve a cure within a relatively short period. However, experts caution that access to timely diagnosis and treatment remains a critical obstacle. A major concern, they note, is

the large number of individuals who are unaware that they are infected. Many people continue to live with hepatitis for years without experiencing noticeable symptoms, allowing the virus to silently damage the liver. For this reason, hepatitis is often referred to as a "silent killer", as untreated infections can eventually lead to liver cirrhosis, liver failure and, in some cases, liver cancer. Specialists point out that the introduction of direct-acting antiviral (DAA) therapies has revolutionised hepatitis C treatment over the past decade, replacing older and more prolonged treatment regimens. Nevertheless, they warn that treatment alone cannot eliminate the disease if new infections

continue to occur at a significant rate. Discussing the factors contributing to the spread of hepatitis, health professionals identify unsafe injections and poor infection-control practices as some of the most important drivers of transmission. The reuse of syringes, injections administered by untrained individuals, inadequate sterilisation procedures in certain healthcare and dental facilities, and improper disposal of medical waste are frequently cited among the key risk factors. Public health experts also highlight Pakistan's high reliance on injectable medicines. Many patients continue to prefer injections over oral medications even for minor illnesses,

resulting in one of the highest rates of therapeutic injections in the region and increasing the risk of disease transmission when safety standards are not strictly observed. Another area of concern is the availability of counterfeit or substandard syringes and medical products. Although regulatory authorities and law-enforcement agencies periodically conduct enforcement actions, experts say that ensuring the quality and safety of medical supplies remains essential to reducing infection risks. The situation differs somewhat for hepatitis B, for which an effective vaccine is available. Gastroenterologists and liver disease specialists describe vaccination as the most effective tool for preventing hepatitis B infection. However, they note that a substantial number of adults remain unvaccinated despite the availability of immunisation programmes. According to experts, expanding vaccination coverage beyond childhood immunisation and targeting at-risk adult populations could significantly reduce the future burden of hepatitis B in the country.

Government agencies and health authorities continue to implement programmes aimed at hepatitis prevention and control, including screening, diagnosis, treatment and public awareness initiatives. Officials say regulatory oversight of medicines and medical products also remains an important component of national disease-control efforts. Health experts emphasise, however, that Pakistan's greatest challenge lies not only in treating existing patients but also in preventing new infections. They argue that unless issues such as unsafe injections, weak infection-control systems, inadequate healthcare practices and limited public awareness are effectively addressed, the goal of eliminating hepatitis will remain difficult to achieve. Pakistan, they say, stands at a critical juncture. On one hand, advances in treatment, improved diagnostic tools and growing awareness offer reasons for optimism. On the other, millions of undiagnosed individuals, ongoing transmission risks and systemic healthcare challenges continue to complicate the path towards a hepatitis-free future.

Pakistan's Nutraceutical Sector Gains Momentum Amid Rising Health Awareness

KARACHI: Pakistan's nutraceutical sector is rapidly emerging as a significant component of the country's health and wellness economy, driven by growing consumer awareness, changing lifestyles and increasing demand for preventive healthcare products. Industry observers say the market for nutraceuticals, including vitamins, mineral supplements, functional foods and other health-supporting products, has expanded considerably in recent years as consumers become more conscious of nutrition, immunity and overall well-being. According to industry sources, the sector has witnessed sustained growth, attracting the attention of both local manufacturers and international brands seeking opportunities in Pakistan's evolving healthcare market. Investors increasingly view the industry as part of a broader "wellness economy", with substantial potential for future expansion. Health experts attribute the growing demand for nutraceutical products to a heightened focus on disease prevention and healthy living. The use of dietary supplements aimed at improving immunity, addressing nutritional deficiencies and supporting general health has become more common among urban consumers. At the same time, functional foods and herbal-based nutraceutical products are gradually becoming part of everyday dietary habits, contributing to the sector's

expanding market footprint. Stakeholders from both regulatory and industrial circles note that gradual improvements are also being made in product oversight and quality assurance. Efforts are underway to strengthen registration procedures, enhance quality standards and improve monitoring mechanisms for products available in the market. Experts believe that a robust regulatory framework will be critical to ensuring the sector's sustainable growth and maintaining consumer confidence as the market continues to expand. Industry representatives say the nutraceutical sector is not only influencing health and wellness trends but is also creating new opportunities for investment, employment and local manufacturing. Several domestic companies have increased their focus on research and development in an effort to produce products that meet international quality standards

and compete more effectively in regional and global markets. Public health specialists, however, stress that while nutraceutical products may play a supportive role in maintaining health, their use should be guided by reliable information and, where appropriate, professional advice. They caution against unnecessary or excessive consumption and emphasise the importance of evidence-based use. Overall, analysts view the nutraceutical industry as one of the emerging segments of Pakistan's healthcare economy, with growing relevance for public health, industrial development and investment. They believe that with continued regulatory strengthening, innovation and consumer awareness, the sector has the potential to become an important pillar of the country's health and wellness landscape in the years ahead.



DRAP Advances Digital Drug Monitoring, Secures Key International Regulatory Recognition

ISLAMABAD: The Drug Regulatory Authority of Pakistan (DRAP) has achieved two significant milestones in its efforts to strengthen pharmaceutical regulation, enhance drug quality oversight and align the country's regulatory framework with international standards. Among the most notable developments was Pakistan's attainment of Observer Status in the International Council for Harmonisation (ICH), a move widely regarded as an important step towards greater integration with the global pharmaceutical regulatory community. Regulatory experts say the development will enable Pakistan to engage more closely with internationally recognised guidelines governing the quality, safety and efficacy of medicines. The status is also expected to support the local pharmaceutical industry's efforts to align with global standards and improve export competitiveness in international markets. Another major initiative during the period was progress towards the implementation of a nationwide Track and Trace System for pharmaceutical

products. The digital monitoring mechanism is designed to track medicines throughout the supply chain, from manufacturing facilities to end users, with the aim of curbing the circulation of counterfeit, substandard and unregistered products. Under the proposed system, manufacturers are required to provide unique identification codes for each medicine, which will be scanned at various points along the supply chain. This system is intended to enhance patient safety standards and monitoring of adverse drug reactions and vaccine-related safety events. Training programmes and awareness activities were conducted to encourage more effective reporting mechanisms and enhance patient safety standards

further progress was reported in the area of quality management, where the authority undertook measures aimed at aligning internal regulatory processes with internationally accepted practices. These initiatives included staff training and improvements in decision-making, inspection and approval procedures to promote greater efficiency and transparency. The authority also prioritised strengthening its Good Manufacturing Practices (GMP) inspection framework. Efforts were made to enhance the capacity of regulatory inspectors and adopt internationally recognised inspection methodologies to ensure that medicines produced locally meet accepted quality and safety benchmarks. In the field of clinical research, regulatory engagement expanded through a risk-based approach intended to facilitate collaboration with research institutions and pharmaceutical companies. Officials said the objective was to promote safe, transparent and scientifically robust clinical trial practices while supporting the development of a stronger research environment in Pakistan. Attention was also directed towards traditional and herbal medicines. During various engagements, stakeholders emphasised the importance of integrating traditional healthcare products into a framework based on scientific evidence and regulatory compliance to improve product quality, safety and consumer confidence.

Meanwhile, DRAP continued to accelerate its digitalisation agenda by expanding online licensing services, electronic application processing and other digital regulatory functions. The move is aimed at improving transparency, reducing administrative delays and facilitating greater ease of doing business for industry stakeholders. Overall, observers note a clear trend towards regulatory modernisation, international harmonisation and the adoption of technology-driven oversight mechanisms within Pakistan's pharmaceutical sector. While many of these reforms are still in the implementation phase, experts believe their long-term impact will depend on effective execution and measurable improvements at the operational level. They argue that the coming months will be critical in determining how successfully these initiatives translate into stronger regulatory performance, enhanced drug safety and greater public confidence in the country's healthcare and pharmaceutical systems.

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Hospital Expansion, New Healthcare Projects and Revival of Sehat Sahulat Programme Mark Significant Month for Health Sector

KARACHI: Pakistan's healthcare sector witnessed a series of notable developments during the month, with federal and provincial governments announcing new hospital projects, expanded healthcare facilities and increased budgetary allocations aimed at strengthening medical services across the country. The developments have drawn attention to ongoing efforts to improve healthcare infrastructure, expand access to specialised treatment and enhance public health services amid growing demand for medical care. In its budget proposals for the new fiscal year, the federal government allocated more than Rs53 billion for health and nutrition-related initiatives, alongside substantial funding for various development projects. These include the planned Islamabad Cancer Hospital, the Jinmah Medical Complex, expansion of the Pakistan Institute of Medical Sciences (PIMS) Polyclinic facilities, improvements in stroke and critical care services, and the national hepatitis control programme. Meanwhile, the Punjab government proposed record funding for the health sector and announced a range of initiatives, including new cardiac surgery units, cancer treatment facilities, advanced diagnostic services and an air ambulance programme. Healthcare experts say such projects could significantly improve access to specialised medical treatment in the province. Sindh also increased allocations for the health sector, with additional funding earmarked for major public healthcare institutions, including the National Institute of Cardiovascular Diseases and the Sindh Institute of Child Health and Neonatology.

Officials say the funding is intended to expand services and strengthen healthcare delivery across the province. Another major development during the month was the restoration of the Sehat Sahulat Programme in Islamabad and surrounding areas. Under the programme, eligible patients have once again been granted access to free medical treatment at dozens of participating hospitals. Authorities have indicated that a phased expansion of the initiative is also under consideration. Measures were also introduced to strengthen the healthcare workforce. A new legal framework for the nursing and midwifery professions received approval, while hospitals and healthcare institutions were directed to ensure the registration of allied health professionals. Policymakers say the objective is to improve professional standards and enhance the quality of patient care. Despite these developments, challenges within the healthcare system continued to surface. In Sindh, doctors, nurses and

paramedical staff launched protest campaigns over salary and benefits-related issues, raising concerns about workforce management and administrative efficiency in public hospitals. Health policy experts believe the month represented an important period for Pakistan's healthcare sector, particularly in terms of infrastructure development, specialised treatment facilities and expanded public healthcare programmes. However, they caution that the ultimate success of these initiatives will depend on effective implementation, adequate staffing, sustainable funding and the extent to which the promised benefits reach patients at the grassroots level. According to analysts, while increased investment and new healthcare projects signal a positive direction for the sector, long-term improvements in healthcare outcomes will require continued institutional reforms, stronger governance and consistent delivery of services across both urban and rural areas.



From Rs5,000 Official Fee to Rs250,000 in Practice: Questions Persist Over Drug Sale Licensing System

KARACHI: Pakistan's retail pharmaceutical sector continues to face significant regulatory and operational challenges, with concerns ranging from the shortage of qualified pharmacists and widespread over-the-counter sale of prescription medicines to allegations of irregularities in the drug sale licensing process. Healthcare professionals and industry stakeholders say that despite legal requirements mandating the presence of qualified pharmacists at licensed medical stores, a large number of outlets continue to be operated by untrained personnel. In some cases, critics allege that medicines are dispensed by individuals lacking the professional qualifications necessary to provide guidance on drug use and dosage. According to industry estimates, Sindh has around 30,000 medical stores, while the number of registered pharmacists is considerably lower. Experts argue that only a fraction of these pharmacists are actively employed in community pharmacies and retail outlets, creating a gap between regulatory requirements and actual practice. Healthcare specialists warn that the absence of qualified pharmacy professionals can expose patients to significant risks. They note that alternative medicines are often provided when prescribed drugs are unavailable, sometimes without adequate understanding of a patient's medical condition, treatment history or potential drug interactions. Concerns have also been raised regarding the alleged use of a single pharmacist's credentials for multiple outlets. Under existing regulations, a licensed pharmacy is required to operate under the supervision of a registered pharmacist. However, industry observers claim that in some cases pharmacists are listed on official records while remaining physically absent from the premises. Drug inspectors are responsible for verifying both licensing compliance and pharmacist availability, yet critics argue that enforcement remains inconsistent. The issue is compounded by widespread violations of prescription drug regulations. Antibiotics, anti-allergy medicines, vitamins and various other pharmaceutical products are frequently sold without a doctor's prescription, despite legal restrictions governing their distribution. Medical experts caution that inappropriate dispensing practices, incorrect dosages and confusion arising from similar drug names can place patient safety at risk. The unchecked use of antibiotics is of particular concern, as it contributes to antimicrobial resistance, a growing global health threat that reduces the effectiveness of life-saving medicines. Judicial rulings and regulatory frameworks have repeatedly emphasised the need for licensed pharmacies to maintain the services of qualified pharmacists capable of advising patients on proper medication use. Nevertheless, observers report that in several urban and rural areas, including parts of Karachi's outskirts, some outlets continue to operate without fully meeting these requirements. Questions have also been raised regarding the drug licensing process itself. Prior to 2020, drug sale licences in Karachi were issued through the office of the Director Health. Following administrative reforms, licensing responsibilities were devolved to District Health Officers (DHOs) across the city's districts. Since then, medical store owners and industry representatives have alleged that obtaining or renewing licences has become increasingly expensive and complicated. While the official government fee for a new drug sale licence remains around Rs5,000 and the renewal fee approximately Rs3,000, stakeholders claim that actual

costs can rise significantly due to unofficial payments and administrative hurdles. Some industry representatives allege that licences are being processed at costs ranging from Rs200,000 to Rs300,000 in various districts, with even higher figures reported in certain cases. These claims have not been independently verified, but they continue to fuel debate over transparency and accountability within the licensing system. The licensing process reportedly involves multiple stages of scrutiny, including inspections, documentation review and final approval by district authorities. Pharmacy owners claim that intermediaries and agents often play a prominent role in navigating administrative procedures, adding to the financial burden on applicants. Another area of concern involves the requirement for a valid pharmacy qualification, commonly referred to as Form-D certification, for licensing purposes. Industry stakeholders allege that in some instances the same qualification is used to support multiple outlets, despite regulations prohibiting such practices. Experts note that Pakistan produces thousands of pharmacy graduates annually and possesses a sizeable pool of qualified professionals. However, they argue that the central challenge lies not in the availability of trained pharmacists but in ensuring effective enforcement of existing regulations. According to public health specialists, strengthening inspection systems, improving transparency in licensing procedures and ensuring the physical presence of qualified pharmacists at retail outlets are essential steps towards improving patient safety and restoring confidence in the pharmaceutical supply chain. They maintain that while Pakistan's regulatory framework for pharmaceutical retailing is relatively comprehensive on paper, the effectiveness of the system ultimately depends on consistent enforcement and accountability at the ground level.

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