The medicines that could get you jailed on foreign holidays – and the countries where tourists should take extra care

Many treatments available over the counter in Britain are strictly controlled abroad

Simon Calder Travel Correspondent • Sunday 05 November 2017 10:24 GMT • Comments

British tourist 'could faces death penalty in Egypt' for carrying painkillers

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A British woman, Laura Plummer, has been held in an Egyptian prison for four weeks.

She was detained after she tried to bring painkillers into the country. Her ordeal is a reminder to travellers that many medicines routinely prescribed and available over the counter in Britain may not be legal abroad.

What were the circumstances of Laura Plummer's arrest?

The 33-year-old from Hull had flown to the Egyptian resort of Hurghada to visit her husband, who suffers from back pain. Before she left, a friend who had been prescribed with several hundred Tramadol tablets gave them to Ms Plummer so that she could take them to her husband. Ms Plummer was arrested when the medicine was found in her suitcase by customs officials at Hurghada airport.

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Her family say that she signed a 38-page statement in Arabic, believing she would be freed, but instead she was incarcerated and has remained so since 8 October.

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What was the problem?

Tramadol is widely prescribed in Britain. But Egypt, in common with many other countries, has strict rules on any drugs containing opioid analgesics, such as Tramadol and codeine. The Foreign Office says: "Some prescribed and over-the-counter medicines that are available in the UK are considered controlled substances in Egypt and can't be brought into the country without prior permission from Egypt's Ministry of Health.

"If you arrive in Egypt without this permission and the required documentation, the medication will not be allowed into the country and you may be prosecuted."

What could Ms Plummer have done differently to help her husband get the medication he needs?

The problems faced by Ms Plummer's husband might have been addressed by talking to the Egyptian authorities about how he could be provided with suitable medication by the health service in Egypt. If she had contacted the Egyptian embassy in London in advance of her trip and told them what she was planning to do, she would almost certainly have been told not to contemplate such a course of action.

Even if the painkillers been prescribed for Ms Plummer, she would have needed a medical certificate from her GP explaining why she had them, and why she was bringing them in a large quantity.

There are several questions that the NHS will be keen to ask about how controlled medication in such quantities was obtained by one person (normally prescriptions are restricted to 30 days' supply), and then taken out of the UK by someone else.

As it is, unfortunately she arrived with a significant quantity of medicines which are regarded as illegal drugs in Egypt.

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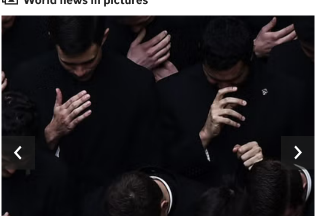

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Is Egypt particularly strict?

No. There are dozens of other countries where these sorts of medicines are banned substances, and where a similar view would be taken of someone trying to import what would be seen as significant quantities of illicit drugs. Opioid analgesics such as Tramadol and codeine are on the World Health Organisation's *Model List of Essential Medicines*, which means the UN health body regards them as valuable treatment which should be widely available. But customs officials in many countries are extremely hot on any substance derived from opium poppies.

Where should people take extra care?

Almost all nations ban the importation of drugs that are regarded by the authorities as being dangerous and having no medical value, such as heroin, marijuana and many synthetic recreational pharmaceuticals.

Middle Eastern countries take a particularly strong interest in what they regard as drug smuggling, and will even check transit passengers and their baggage if they believe it may contain banned substances. The UAE authorities have imprisoned people for testing positive for medicines such as codeine and the sleeping pill temazepan in their urine, and for arriving with poppy seeds from a bread roll they had eaten earlier on the journey. The list of controlled substances in Dubai, Abu Dhabi and elsewhere in the UAE includes many over-the-counter medicines.

Similarly, Thailand has strict laws on import of medications. Travellers planning to take opioid analgesics typically included in strong painkillers, such as codeine and dozens of other substances designated "Category 2", into Thailand must obtain a permit issued by the Food and Drug Administration before travelling. They are limited to 30 days of prescribed usage.

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In Japan, what the Foreign Office calls a "strictly enforced anti-stimulant drugs law" bans the importation of medicines for allergies and sinus problems, even including Vicks inhalers.

Doesn't that makes it sound as though *any* medicines could land you in trouble abroad?

The most common medicines, such as aspirin, treatments for diabetes, high blood pressure and contraceptive pills, are unlikely to cause any problem in normal amounts. But if you are importing medicines in larger quantities than you would need for a short visit, you can expect some close questioning. And for any medicine with ingredients derived from opium poppies, you should be extremely cautious. Talk to the embassy of the country you're planning to visit, though be warned that – as I have found while researching the subject – this is not always an easy task.

BRING THEM HOME NOW

At the very least, get a letter from your GP explaining why he or she has prescribed the medicines you are carrying. And it goes without saying that you should not take in anything that is not intended for your personal use.

Meanwhile, what can the British Government do for Laura Plummer and other people who are incarcerated abroad?

Diplomats can ensure they are being kept in humane conditions, and that they have the proper access to lawyers, but they cannot interfere with the due process of a country's legal system – just as foreign governments are not allowed to influence the judicial process here. Having said that, I hope I am right to think that the very alarming talk of 25 years in an Egyptian jail or even the death penalty is scaremongering.

The authorities in Cairo are aware of how the story is being told in the UK, and it is very likely that some behind-the-scenes discussions are taking place which will mean Ms Plummer is soon released – just as we've seen in recent cases of British visitors to Dubai facing severe penalties. With the Egyptian tourism minister visiting London this week, I am optimistic that she will be back with her family by next weekend.

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As she arrived in Egypt to see her husband - who she visits often throughout the year
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