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Newsletter

The Counterfeiting Superhighway

It is fundamentally impossible to declare the true magnitude of medicine counterfeiting on a global scale due to its clandestine nature. Counterfeit medicines are shipped covertly across a range of international jurisdictions and frequently traded via unofficial and uncontrolled websites. We know, however, that the industry is growing rapidly. The latest intelligence available on the incursion of counterfeit medicines reveals that there were over 50% more seizures of counterfeit medicines in 2007 than in the previous year.¹ Officials have reported a shift in the type of products being counterfeited; away from cigarettes, DVDs and CDs and towards medicines, toys and cosmetics.¹ The Center for Medicine in the Public Interest (CFPI), based in the US, predicts that counterfeit medicine sales will reach approximately €55.5bn globally by 2010 – an increase of more than 90% in just 5 years.²

A large number of these counterfeit medicines find their way into the hands of European patients through illegal online pharmacies. Many of the illegal websites sell prescription medicines, or unsafe counterfeit versions, directly to members of the public without a valid prescription or consultation with a healthcare professional. This is the most dangerous aspect of online medicines trade, as the consumer cannot possibly know what is in the products they receive, or whether the medicine they are ordering is appropriate for their condition.

In response to this alarming trend, the European Alliance for Access to Safe Medicines (EAASM) produced *The Counterfeiting Superhighway*, a comprehensive research report that examines the dangerous practices of illegal online pharmacies. The report reveals that a frightening 62% of medicines purchased online are fake or substandard. These include medicines indicated to treat serious conditions such as cardiovascular and respiratory disease, neurological disorders and mental health conditions.

An in-depth analysis of over 100 websites revealed that:

- ★ 90.3% do not require sight of a prescription
- ★ 95.6% are unlicensed pharmacies
- ★ 78.8% are violating brand intellectual property
- ★ of those pharmacies that have 'stamp of approval', 86% lead you to a bogus approval page.

Following the initial analysis, commonly purchased prescription-only medicines were ordered online. All medicines were delivered without requiring the sight of a prescription. This is illegal and presents a serious threat to public health.

Expert visual and chemical analysis of the prescription-only medicines purchased online compounded the desk research findings. Many of the medicines arrived without boxes, or patient information leaflets – and those that did were in a number of different languages. Among the most alarming was the blister pack of unauthorised generic 'Plavix®' (clopidogrel) which arrived wrapped in a copy of an Indian newspaper, with free unauthorised generic 'Viagra®' (sildenafil) taped on top.

It is obviously extremely alarming that a patient seeking medication for a heart condition would be sent unsolicited, unprescribed and unauthorised medicine without any medical assessment or guidance. Apart from possibly being fake, this 'bonus' medicine could interact dangerously with the clopidogrel also contained in the same package, or could exacerbate a pre-existing medical condition.

Among a number of recommendations, the report suggests that popular search engines such as Google, Yahoo and MSN should remove web pages from search results that advertise counterfeit medicines. This tactic has already proved successful before, for example, in preventing people from accessing child pornography websites, so surely similar success can be achieved with combating illegal online pharmacies.

The full report was launched in Washington DC on 5 June. It includes key recommendations for the pharmaceutical industry and all relevant stakeholders, as well as practical steps consumers can take to protect themselves from counterfeit/substandard medicines. It is available to download free of charge from the EAASM website (www.eaasm.com).

EAASM at the European Commission

The EAASM was delighted to be invited by the European Commission to showcase some of the medicines purchased as part of *The Counterfeiting Superhighway* report at their High Level Conference on Counterfeiting. The conference provided the EAASM with an excellent opportunity to demonstrate to the 500+ attendees the risks for patients of purchasing medicines online.

The response the EAASM got from the attendees was very encouraging – the majority were genuinely shocked by the condition of the medicines received, and were very enthusiastic about the report. The attention attracted by the EAASM stand generated some significant press coverage, including two television interviews with Jim Thomson, EAASM Chair. This clearly demonstrates that there is real interest in our work.

Patient information leaflet

The EAASM is currently working on the 'Patient's guide to counterfeit medicines' leaflet. Consumers have lots of choices of where to buy their medication. The wide range of choices available means that today, more than ever, patients have to be aware that counterfeit medicines are on the rise and that these could harm whoever takes them. This leaflet aims to raise awareness of counterfeit medicines, and provide information and useful tips on how to reduce the chances of taking counterfeit medicines.

The leaflet will be distributed by patient associations and will be available in June 2008 to download from the EAASM website.

New EAASM sponsor

We are pleased to announce that Ahura Scientific have become a sponsor of the EAASM. Here's what they have to say:

"As a leading provider of handheld analytical instruments that can detect counterfeit medicines instantly, Ahura Scientific has seen the problem of counterfeit and substandard pharmaceuticals increase significantly over the last few years. Protecting people from exposure to these tampered medicines is an objective we share with the EAASM. We are proud to support the important work the EAASM is undertaking to combat counterfeit pharmaceuticals; from the source of production through to distribution to the patient." *Julien Bradley, Ahura Scientific, Inc.*

References

1. Financial Times (2008). Surge in European seizures of fake drugs. Available at: <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/137d81bc-2609-11dd-b510-000077b07658.html>. Date accessed: 3 June 2008.
2. The Center for Medicine in the Public Interest (2006). Counterfeit drugs and China. Available at: <http://www.cmpi.org/testimony/counterfeit-drugs-and-china/>. Date accessed: 3 June 2008.

