

THE 'CLICK' OF DEATH?

Counterfeit Medicines Study says Patients are at Risk

Operation PANGEA - the name given to the worldwide clampdown on internet sites selling counterfeit medicines (and in which the Irish Medicines Board is involved), has brought this extremely serious problem fully into the spotlight

As online 'dispensaries' are cashing in on gullible and vulnerable, cash-strapped customers and with two sites in Kerry and Dublin already raided in relation to one website which was subsequently shut down, the threat that pharmacists in Ireland could be facing by getting the profession a bad name has been highlighted. Furthermore, the Irish patients could be at severe risk if they are tempted to buy from such charlatan sites. By a simple click of a search engine or the acceptance of a spam email, patients can get access to the morning after pill, Viagra and a host of other medications which, normally should only be prescribed by their GP and dispensed by their pharmacist. Two frightening cases, in May of last year, saw a 36 year old man and a 22 year old woman from England die from taking an illicit drug they believed to be Valium. The two victims died in separate incidences after taking the drug, which presented itself in a blue tablet with white powder inside. Referring to the European Alliance for Access to Safe Medicines' report this year entitled, *'The Counterfeiting*



Jim Thompson

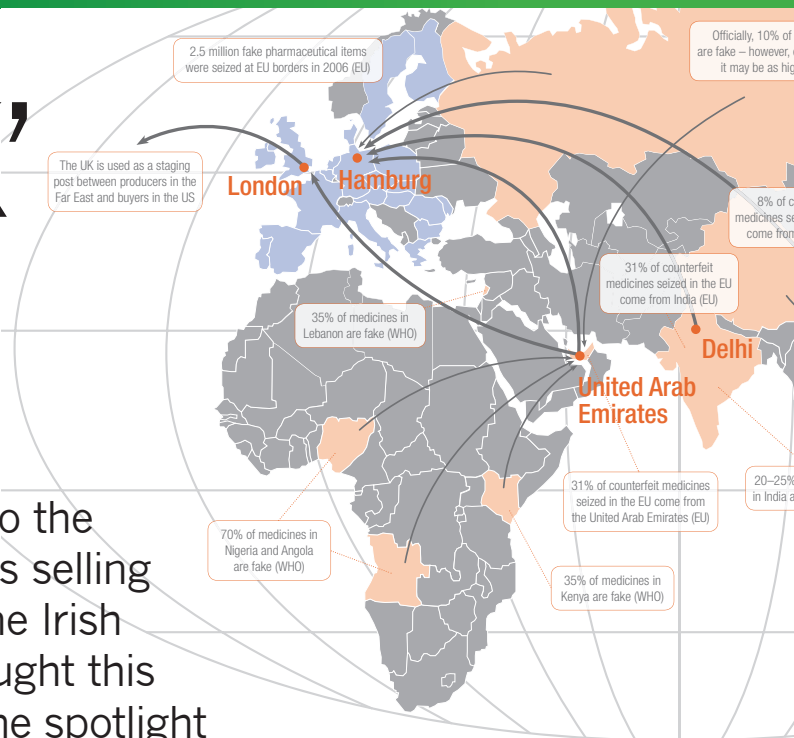
*Superhighway - The Growing Threat of Online Pharmacies'**, Jim Thompson, its chairman said that, as healthcare professionals, who are dealing with drugs

every day, pharmacists should be vigilant of all things suspicious, both online and within their pharmacy. "Always deal with people and suppliers you know," he advised. "Beware of any 'deals of the day' or offers that are too good to be true - because they more than likely are. "Chances are, if medicines are cheap, they are counterfeit or suspicious in some way." He also added that should the pharmacist be confronted with questions about buying online by their patients, the obvious answer for most would be to advise them against this completely. However, Mr Thompson suggested that they can still offer the following pointers: "Don't buy from a site where they do

not ask for a prescription and never buy from a website where there are no bricks and mortar to support it, i.e. a proper address (which is credible) and a telephone number that works (i.e. someone answers when it is tried). "The vast majority of these sites are illegal," he continued. "However, if the patient chooses to buy from one of them, it should be pointed out that they are taking themselves out of the health system." If the pharmacist is presented with suspect, counterfeit drugs, he/she should report the matter, as soon as possible, to their pharmacy regulator, the Pharmaceutical Society of Ireland. "The Irish Regulator is excellent and extremely good at liaising with pharmacists," added Mr Thompson. "Ireland could also benefit from a Patient Hotline, where the patient and regular internet users could call to report anything suspicious, such as that which exists in the UK," Mr. Thompson added.

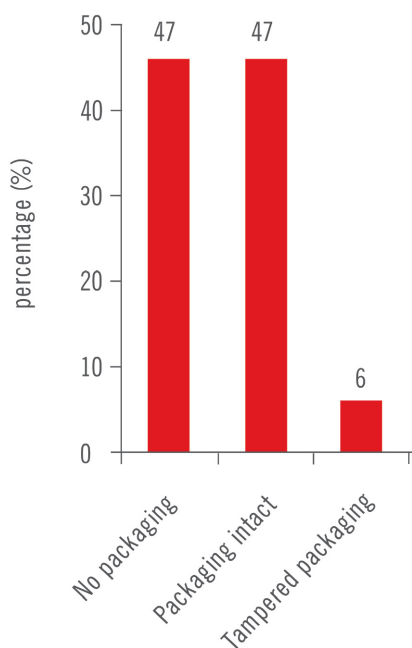
The EAASM Report

The objective of the EAASM Report on counterfeit medicines was to clarify the likelihood of medicines

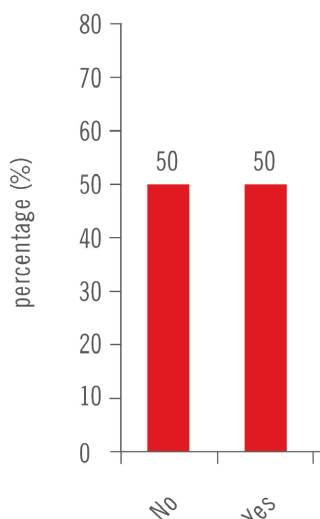


REPORT

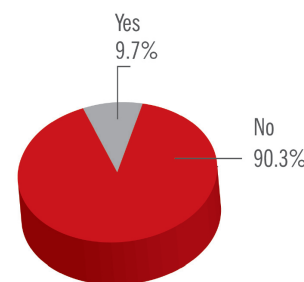
Packaging of medicines bought online



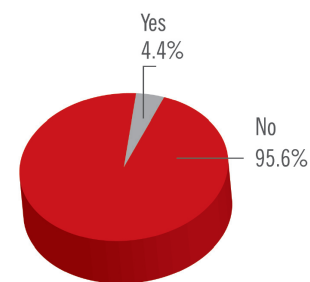
Was there a patient information leaflet supplied



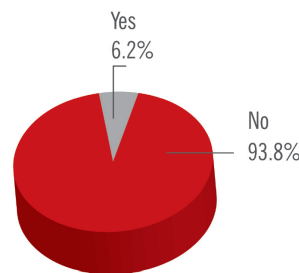
Was a prescription required for prescription-only medicines?



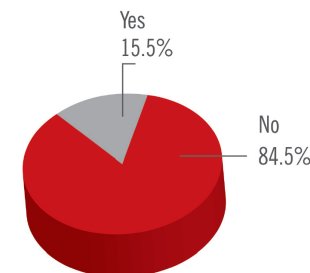
Was the pharmacy listed as a legitimate website?



Was there a named, verifiable pharmacist?



Did the pharmacy physically exist?



being purchased online as being fake, substandard or otherwise illegal and to develop recommendations that will protect patients from any potentially lethal outcomes of being able to access these products.

In an analysis of over one hundred online pharmacies, where some common POMs were purchased the following was found:

- Expert visual analysis of over 30 purchased medicines concluded that an alarming 62% were substandard or counterfeit.
- It was possible to obtain POMs, either genuine or fake, without medical assessment or guidance from over 90% of the online pharmacies investigated.
- It was found that when buying POMs from unregulated internet pharmacies, there is a three in five chance of receiving a substandard, counterfeit or unapproved medicine.
- Recommendations of the report

call for all stakeholders to assume responsibility and take action on this issue.

Other issues to be remembered are the reasons patients are motivated to buy over the internet, as opposed to seeking medical help and perhaps this is where the Profession could help to provide some solutions?

- Elderly and/or disabled patients may be unable to visit a high street pharmacist during normal working hours and may choose to buy their medicines from a legitimate, registered online pharmacy.
- Internet is speedy and convenient
- Patients may be too embarrassed to discuss their condition with a doctor, nurse, pharmacist or other healthcare professional.
- Patients do not want their family or employer/authorities to find out about their condition
- Patients may fear that a doctor might be reluctant to prescribe a particular medicine

- Patient's perception - they may believe that the costs are lower to purchase online.

What can be done?

In the short term, the pharmacist could perhaps run a campaign in their local area, advising patients against buying online. As well as this let the patients know that their local pharmacy is as competitive, if not cheaper and safer than the online dispensary and their local pharmacist is in a position to offer the patient advice and back-up. In addition, patients who buy counterfeit, substandard drugs are taking themselves out of the health service and this could be far more costly and dangerous, in the long run, than saving a few Euros on (counterfeit) medicines in the first place.

*All materials used are courtesy of the EAASM and as published in the report - 'The counterfeiting superhighway-the growing threat of online pharmacies'