

## Patient Associations: Join the fight against counterfeit medicines

“Counterfeiters try not to kill you. Not because they care for your life, but because they’d lose a paying customer.”

Jim Thomson, EAASM Chair, described the mindset of medicine counterfeiters at a joint event with the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency (MHRA), in London on 19 November 2008.

Over 100 of the UK’s foremost patient associations were invited to hear directly from Jim, plus Mick Deats (Head of Enforcement) and Nimo Ahmed (Head of Intelligence) at the MHRA, about the abhorrent risks fake drugs pose to UK and European patients – along with urgent requests for patient group representatives to lend their communications expertise to the cause.

Recent EAASM research (*The Counterfeiting Superhighway*, 2008) indicates that more than 6 in 10 prescription drugs bought online without a prescription are counterfeit or substandard... and 10 out of 10 are illegal in that all the prescription only medicines were supplied without a prescription.



**“We can’t remove free will from patients choosing to buy medicines online, but we can at the very least ensure they can make an informed decision, knowing the risks.”**

*Mary Baker, MBE, President of The European Federation of Neurological Associations*

## Help us to protect your members...

To this end, the EAASM and MHRA urgently require patient associations to provide insights on producing the right media and materials to reach and influence their specific patient membership.

There is no one definition of a ‘patient’, which is why **we need your help** in reaching every different individual at risk of damaging their health by buying potentially lethal concoctions online from unlicensed, uncontrolled websites.

A comprehensive and creative discussion between attendees at the EAASM/MHRA meeting provided robust suggestions for communicating with specific patient groups. But we need more ideas and input.

Please tell us how to engage with your members and we will work with you to safeguard their wellbeing. There is no bliss in ignorance of the dangers when buying prescription medicines online.

**“What I find particularly scary is the complacency, or lack of insight, within the general public.”**

*Ian Banks, President of The European Men’s Health Forum*

If you work for a patient association and can help the EAASM and MHRA to communicate with your members effectively and responsibly, please contact: [enquiries@eaasm.eu](mailto:enquiries@eaasm.eu)

## EAASM Chairman’s comment



“A major part of our work focuses on raising patient awareness of counterfeit medicines. This is a delicate issue. On the one hand, we want people to be aware of the dangers while, on the other, we don’t want to raise concerns to the point that people stop taking their medicine. There’s a balance to be struck and to ensure the best and most appropriate communication we need to enlist the help of as many patient groups as possible.

The joint EAASM/MHRA patient association seminar held on 19 November was an informative and inspiring event. However, from my point of view, it was also the most encouraging anti-counterfeiting event I’ve attended for a long time. I hadn’t realised how interactive it would be. The attendees came from a wide range of organisations and had clearly come along not just to listen, but to take part. I can’t recall being asked so many relevant questions and the links forged on the day will – I’m certain – lead to far greater patient awareness of the dangers of counterfeit medicines. We’re now planning to roll this event out in other European countries.”

## Fake drugs in the legitimate supply chain

As the UK medicines watchdog, the MHRA is the guardian of the gateway to our regulated market – a market which aims to provide authentic medicines from manufacturers via the NHS to patients.

However, in 2007, counterfeiters managed to breach security and penetrate the regulated medicines’ supply chain, infiltrating it with dangerous imitation products, which fully licensed pharmacists and hospitals unwittingly gave out to patients.

Most sickening of all, is that the drugs faked were medicines for treating cancer, schizophrenia and serious cardiovascular illnesses. The recipients of these drugs had been dealt a tough hand already, and surely did not deserve (as nobody does) to have their life threatened in this way for criminal profit.

**“We’ll keep using evidence-based intelligence to lobby for improved regulation and legislation... we prosecute under the Trademark Act which carries stronger penalties, but it gives a skewed message about what the MHRA is there to do.”**

*Mick Deats, Head of Enforcement, MHRA*

The MHRA is leading Europe in rooting out counterfeits and prosecuting their makers, with a major case coming to court in 2009, hopefully adding to the convictions and jail terms already secured for several offenders.

The MHRA is understandably eager to warn the general public of the risks in buying prescription medicines online. The best way to achieve this in a responsible manner is in partnership with the EAASM and other patient groups.

Mick Deats and his intelligence team welcome the input and expertise of every patient association and patient-interest group in the UK and Europe, in devising and disseminating appropriate educational and awareness-raising material.

A series of ‘internet days of action’ have proved very successful in grabbing the attention of the media and ministers, and in 2009 the MHRA will pilot several new ‘Focus Group’ discussions to which patient associations are invited to share their communications expertise and resources.

It is imperative that consumers are able to make informed decisions when using the internet to source prescription medicines. Without these warnings, the risks will only become more severe.

To get involved or lend your support, contact [enquiries@eaasm.eu](mailto:enquiries@eaasm.eu) or [info@mhra.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:info@mhra.gsi.gov.uk)

## What makes a good target for counterfeiters?

According to the EAASM and the MHRA, the UK, along with other European countries, is a hot target market for vendors of counterfeit medicines for four key reasons.

- 1) It is a relatively high-price market in Europe (counterfeiters will go to any lengths to maximise their profit, even at the cost of life and health).
- 2) It has a complicated supply chain, with several weak spots (the UK is a central transit point, as well as a popular destination for a myriad of packages).
- 3) It is a main terminal (ie, point of sale) for Europe’s parallel trade networks (counterfeiters have already exploited the repacking/relabeling process used by parallel traders, to introduce fake drugs into the regulated supply chain).
- 4) It has a robust health technology assessment body (medicines which NICE deems too costly for the NHS to afford are all potential targets for counterfeiters, as they know that many patients may seek to source their own medicines).

The EAASM applauds and supports the MHRA’s excellent work in rooting out fake drugs entering the UK and prosecuting their producers in court. The requirement now is to educate patients (and prescribers) about the dangers of buying prescriptions medicines online.



Medicine storage: counterfeit, on the left, versus a legitimate pharmaceutical manufacturer, on the right

## What to do next...

“This is the most important thing I’ve ever done,” Jim Thomson told delegates at the joint EAASM/MHRA event in London on 19 November 2008.

“Medicine counterfeiters don’t operate according to the same rules that we do. They’re concerned about profit and unconcerned about life. The question is, how do we make an impact against them?”

In 2009, it is planned for the EAASM’s website ([www.eaasm.eu](http://www.eaasm.eu)) to host an array of new interactive services – enabling the public to describe their medicine sourcing experiences anonymously – plus educational materials that can be transferred to patient association and other appropriate websites.

But what can you do to help in the fight against counterfeit and substandard medicines?

- ★ To lend your support and expertise in communicating with specific patient groups, contact the EAASM via [enquiries@eaasm.eu](mailto:enquiries@eaasm.eu)
- ★ To help the MHRA find counterfeit medicines and those attempting to put them in the hands of UK patients, email [info@mhra.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:info@mhra.gsi.gov.uk)
- ★ To get involved in the EAASM ‘online consumer’ research and/or MHRA Focus Groups planned for 2009, contact [enquiries@eaasm.eu](mailto:enquiries@eaasm.eu)
- ★ To provide sponsorship support for the EAASM and its work, contact [jim.thomson@eaasm.eu](mailto:jim.thomson@eaasm.eu)
- ★ Read *The Counterfeiting Superhighway* report (2008), which can be downloaded for free at: [www.eaasm.eu/Media\\_centre/EAASM\\_reports](http://www.eaasm.eu/Media_centre/EAASM_reports)