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## **Health Canada to crack down on fake pills**

Tom Blackwell, National Post

A B.C. woman is fatally poisoned by counterfeit anxiety pills she ordered over the Internet, four Ontario patients die after apparently consuming fake -- and ineffective -- heart drugs, while Quebec vendors are spotted selling knock-off Viagra at a flea market.

The peddling of bogus pharmaceuticals is becoming such a worrisome problem that Health Canada has begun drafting a new anti-counterfeit strategy, expected to include beefed-up enforcement, stronger ties with police and a public-education campaign, a department official confirmed last week. The federal agency is also planning to hold a conference of interested parties to discuss the threat when the plan is released this fall.

For Health Canada officials used to dealing with a "generally compliant industry," counterfeiting represents a novel kind of health issue, said Paul Duchesne, a department spokesman.

"Within the paradigm of counterfeiting, those responsible not only have deceitful intentions, but complete disregard for the regulatory system," he said. "This new paradigm will require training and collaboration."

The situation in Canada is not as serious as in some developing countries, where as many as half the prescription drugs on the market are imitations, but the phenomenon threatens to take off here if left unchecked, warns a senior Mountie who specializes in the counterfeiting problem.

"I think we do need to take action? The quantity isn't large, but the consequences can be pretty severe," said Superintendent Ken Hansen, director of federal enforcement at the RCMP. "It's something you want to try to nip in the bud before it gets out of control."

Counterfeit drugs have emerged globally as a major problem in the last five years, with one U.S. organization predicting that worldwide sales could reach \$75-billion by 2010. Criminally minded counterfeiters can make copies of expensive pills cheaply, sell them cheaply and earn a healthy profit.

Canada's system of licensed, store-front pharmacies is still fairly safe, thanks to a tight regulatory system and a relatively small number of middlemen that makes slipping counterfeits into the supply chain difficult, experts say.

Nevertheless, bogus medication is increasingly showing up in Canada through unregulated Internet sites and even, in less common cases, at those licensed, real pharmacies.

One of the most disturbing cases involved Marcia Ann Bergeron, a 58-year-old Vancouver Island resident who died this year after taking counterfeit drugs she had ordered from a Web site. They contained high levels of aluminum and other metals that the B.C. coroner blamed this month for her death.

"Internet drug sites selling counterfeit medication are a complex and emerging health care problem," coroner Kerry Clarke warned in her report.

A pharmacy in Hamilton, Ont., was charged with fraud after selling fake versions of Norvasc, a heart drug, containing only talc.

Four patients who bought pills from the pharmacy later died, and coroners could not rule out the phony drugs as a cause. The pharmacist was acquitted this spring, though, after a judge concluded there was no evidence that he sold the drugs knowing they were counterfeit. The druggist said he had bought them from a travelling salesman.

In late 2005, the RCMP charged a pharmacist and his two pharmacies in Richmond Hill, Ont., with selling counterfeit Viagra.

Fraudulent copies of popular drugs have even been used to finance terrorists, U.S. police allege. Five Canadian men were among those charged last year with selling a variety of counterfeit goods and funnelling the money to Hezbollah, the Lebanese extremist group. One Montreal man was charged with peddling 50,000 fake Viagra pills.

Impotence drugs like Viagra, Cialis and Levitra are particularly popular with counterfeiters, who can sell them over the Net --or in flea markets -- to normally careful consumers who are too embarrassed to seek out a prescription from a doctor, said Supt. Hansen.

Pfizer Canada, makers of Viagra, have seen imitations in Canada of two of its other drugs, too: Norvasc and Lipitor, a cholesterol-fighting statin drug, said Sophie McCann, a company spokeswoman. "It seems to be a growing phenomenon," she said.

Meanwhile, medications have not been the only health-related goods to show up here in counterfeit form. Health Canada recently warned that counterfeit brand-name toothpaste from China was being sold in Canada containing dangerous bacteria.

The department has promised to release a draft of its anti-counterfeit strategy this fall. It should include expanding enforcement around suspected counterfeit cases, strengthening "partnerships" with the RCMP and other law-enforcement agencies, educating the public about the dangers of bogus health products and overhauling the Food and Drugs Act to make it more able to deal with counterfeiting, said Paul Duchesne, a department spokesman.

Officials also plan to encourage use of unspecified "emerging technologies" to monitor the drug supply chain and ensure counterfeits are kept out, he said.

Brian Isaac, a Toronto lawyer specializing in intellectual property cases, said the shortcomings of outdated legislation are a major obstacle. Current laws give the Canadian Border Services Agency little power to seize suspected counterfeit drugs, he said.

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