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## **China leads drug spammers**

By Andrew Jack

Nearly two-fifths of spam e-mails offering popular medicines via the internet come from China, raising concerns about the country's role in the supply of unregulated pharmaceutical products, a study said on Monday.

From an analysis of 60m e-mails sent worldwide last June offering six top-selling medicines for sale, MarkMonitor, an internet consultancy, traced 38 per cent of messages and 18 per cent of hosts to China.

The US is the world's largest host of online pharmacies, accounting for 59 per cent of the 3,160 sites referred to in the e-mails, followed by the UK (16 per cent), France (8 per cent) and Canada (6 per cent).

However, 31 per cent of 390 "business to business" sites it identified through the e-mails – which offered bulk purchases to wholesalers of pills valued at \$150m (£76m) – were based in China, ahead of similar services offered in the US (26 per cent) and India (19 per cent).

The Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulatory Agency, the UK medicines watchdog, said it advised against internet medicine sales, and was investigating about 100 such cases.

The report comes as regulators and pharmaceutical companies become increasingly concerned about the growing use of the internet for medicine sales.

Some sites provide legitimate drugs but others have dispatched sub-standard or counterfeit goods.

China has already come under growing criticism in recent weeks over the quality of its toys, toothpaste, medicines and clothing, triggering product recalls and pledges for tougher quality control.

Researchers at MarkMonitor, which is based in San Francisco but co-ordinated its study in the UK, found that a tenth of online pharmacies surveyed stressed that no prescription was required.

Only four had accreditation through the Verified Internet Pharmacy Practice Site system and Average prices were only about one-fifth of those on certified sites.

The majority of the sites offered no encryption to protect customer data, allowing hackers to intercept and gain access to credit card information.

Charlie Abrahams, MarkMonitor's vice president for Europe, Middle East and Africa, said: "I buy almost everything on the internet but I would never buy drugs there. Customers are not only potentially damaging their health but also risk losing money."

He said he believed medicines were probably the most widespread products offered in spam, and that access was often bought or stolen from US hosts by criminals from around the world.

MarkMonitor, which registers internet domain names and helps clients including several pharmaceutical companies protect their brand online, said the medicines analysed included a best-selling "lifestyle" (erectile) and two anti-cholesterol drugs, as well as an anti-anxiety, an antipsychotic and a sleep aid medicine.

The researchers at MarkMonitor did not analyse the quality of the medicines on offer and could not identify how many recipients responded to the e-mails and bought medicines, though it projected annual sales from the sites to be \$4bn.

<http://www.ft.com>