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Beware of fake medicine

By: MANVEET KAUR

Fake drugs are a growing concern in Asia but Malaysia faces a bigger problem of unregistered and adulterated products. MANVEET KAUR writes.

CHANCES are you don't think twice about the medicine you pick up from the pharmacy or the doctors even, trusting that the medicine in the bottle matches the information on the label. After all, why should you? You're getting them from an authorized medical outlet or established pharmacies.

But here's a dose of reality: as more and more drugs are being sold on the Internet and by street peddlers, the proliferation of fake medicine is everywhere.

They look so real even pharmacists are fooled.

In Malaysia, the Ministry of Health (MOH) seized 12,242 fake and unregistered medical products in 2006. Last year, more than 23,000 such products with a face value of more than RM16 million were seized, of which more than half of the counterfeit drugs seized were sold as sex stimulants or Viagra.

The Ministry's Pharmaceutical Services Division principal assistant director Ahmad Nozrin Taharin says they were mainly sold through direct sales.

Regular use of substandard and counterfeit drugs could lead to drug resistance, and in some cases, death, he says.

The estimate of 192,000 patients killed by fake drugs in China in 2001 is a cause for concern.

Studies have shown that some 25 to 50 per cent of the medicines used in developing countries were now believed to be fake, the International Narcotics Control Board said in its 2006 report, quoting the World Health Organisation (WHO) findings.

But Anthony Moffat, Professor of Pharmaceutical Analysis from the School of Pharmacy in University of London, says that the production of substandard and fake drugs is a vast and under-reported problem in Asia.



A counterfeit medicine site.

“Because counterfeiting is difficult to detect, investigate and quantify, it is hard to know or even estimate the true extent of the problem. What is known is that counterfeiting occurs worldwide and is more prevalent in developing countries,” he says.

Until recently, the most frequently counterfeited medicines in wealthy countries were new, expensive lifestyle medicines, such as hormones, steroids and antihistamines. In developing countries the most counterfeited medicines have been those used to treat life-threatening conditions such as malaria, tuberculosis and HIV/AIDS, says Moffat.

WHO has defined counterfeit medicine as “a product that is deliberately and fraudulently mislabeled with respect to identity and/or source. Counterfeiting can apply to both branded and generic products, and counterfeit products may include products with the correct ingredients or the wrong ingredients, without active ingredients or with insufficient active ingredients, or with fake packaging”.

Simply put, counterfeit medicines are known to:

- Not contain any active medicine
- Have dangerous additives such as boric acid, lead-based paint and cement
- Be contaminated
- Possess poor safety and tolerability rates

The outcomes of such consumption are best avoided:

- Poor safety and tolerability of the drug could cause health complications and even, death.
- Waste of money — the product is not what it claims.

There is little research in Malaysia to indicate the extent of the local counterfeit drug market.

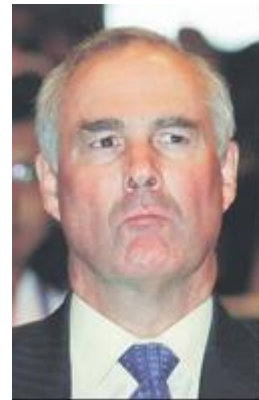
The only survey done was in 1997 on cough and cold medication which revealed that five per cent of such medicines in the market were counterfeits.

Pfizer Malaysia corporate affairs director Narinder Kaur said in Asia, there were counterfeit drugs of Aricept, Celebrex, Diflucan, Feldene, Lipitor, Norvasc, Ponstan, Zolofit and Viagra.

However, Health Minister Datuk Seri Dr Chua Soi Lek commented last year that besides the presence of counterfeits, “a bigger problem faced in Malaysia are unregistered and adulterated products which can equally jeopardise the safety of consumers”.



Ahmad Nozrin says regular use of substandard drugs could lead to death.



Production of fake drugs is a vast and under-reported problem in Asia, says Moffat.

So to combat this problem, the use of the Meditag security label for pharmaceutical products and traditional medicines registered with the Malaysian Drug Control Authority was enforced in Malaysia since May 1, 2005.

With the use of the security label, consumers and pharmacy enforcement officers are now able to easily differentiate between a registered and an unregistered product through the presence or absence of the hologram on the product label.

To date, 280 licensed importers and 214 manufacturers have purchased the Meditag labels to be used on their products.

But is it enough?

Dr Valerio Reggi, chief of the anti-counterfeiting task force created last year by the WHO, said that a global alert system for counterfeit drugs has existed for 16 years, first by fax, and now on the WHO website.

“The task force would try to change that by drawing attention to the problem and getting harsher laws passed,” he said.

“In many countries, counterfeiting a T-shirt means 10 years in jail, but counterfeiting a medicine can be a misdemeanour.”

In Malaysia, under the existing regulation, individuals found selling such drugs risk being fined up to RM25,000 or jailed for up to three years, or both. Companies face a maximum RM50,000 fine or three years' jail or both.

Those who have information on counterfeit products can contact the Pharmaceutical Services Division at the Ministry of Health at 03-7968-2246.

Safe ways to buy medicine

DO'S

- Buy prescription medicines from a reputable pharmacy with which you are familiar.
- Request for products in their original packaging. (Dubious looking packaging is an obvious sign of counterfeit medicines).
- Read and examine the label on the packaging.
- Ensure that the drug is registered with the Ministry of Health and carries the MAL registration with the Meditag hologram decoders.

DON'TS

- Do not buy medicine from an online pharmacy.
- Do not buy medicine from a grocery shop, coffee shops or from roadside stalls

- Do not buy medicine with incomplete or incorrect packaging and labels.

Estimates of counterfeit medicines

THE World Health Organisation estimates counterfeit medicines account for six per cent of the world market

European Union - two to 10 per cent
Europe (non EU) - two to 25 per cent
Asia - 10 to 40 per cent
Africa - 10 to 80 per cent
Others - five to 40 per cent

(Source: Council of Europe Survey Report 2006)

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