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Coroner probes drug deaths Investigation widens into fake medication

By Luma Muhtadie
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The coroner's office is investigating the deaths of "more than one" patient who filled prescriptions for Norvasc at a Hamilton pharmacy alleged to have knowingly dispensed a counterfeit version of the drug.

The coroner joined the RCMP and Ontario College of Pharmacists probes of the King West Pharmacy yesterday after being alerted to the deaths.

Regional Coroner Dr. David Eden would not disclose the number of deaths being examined. He said his office became involved because there are reasonable grounds to believe the deaths may be attributable to the fake versions of the blood pressure and angina drug Norvasc that the patients had received from King West Pharmacy.

"Certainly where a patient was not receiving medication that had been ordered, that would meet the test ... for launching a (coroner's) investigation," he said.

"At the moment, the cases we're investigating are ones in which Norvasc had been dispensed," Eden said. "Whether other drugs will be considered is something we'll be sorting out over the next little while."

The coroner's involvement comes as the RCMP and the Ontario College of Pharmacists pore over paper and electronic records seized from the pharmacy last week.

Both the Mounties and the college are trying to contact dozens of patients who filled prescriptions for Norvasc at King West Pharmacy.

"It's a large undertaking," said RCMP Constable Judy Laurence.

"Our primary focus is to eliminate further risk to patients," said Layne Verbeek, communications manager for the college. "Our second focus is to understand how counterfeit products got into the system."

Documents used to obtain the June 15th search warrant show the investigation centres on two licensed pharmacists, Abadir Nasr of Mississauga and Bhashmang Mehta of Burlington. Both are registered with the Ontario College of Pharmacists and in good standing with no record of discipline.

It also targets Hakim Pharmaceutical Inc., operating as King West Pharmacy, just west of Locke Street. Nasr became the company's director, 51 per cent shareholder and designated manager last August, when he bought the pharmacy from Mehta.

Both men "are believed to be importing and dispensing counterfeit and unapproved Norvasc tablets to their patients," Corporal Warren MacInnis of the RCMP wrote in a 50-page sworn statement.

No charges have been laid and all allegations contained in the documents are for the purpose of securing a warrant and have not been proven in court.

The Ontario College of Pharmacists will be in court tomorrow seeking an injunction to close the pharmacy.

When the Spectator visited the pharmacy yesterday, Nasr was busy dispensing prescriptions.

"I'm very stressed out now," he said. "Please don't push me." He asked that any further questions be directed to his Toronto lawyer, Edward Greenspan, who refused to comment.

Mehta also refused to comment.

The investigation was sparked when a customer refilled her Norvasc prescription at the King West Pharmacy and noticed that her new batch of pills had a different shape. She told a member of her church, a Port Dover pharmacist, who in turn alerted Pfizer.

During their 12-hour raid on 505 King St. W., investigators seized a large quantity of three different types of pills resembling Norvasc.

One is a counterfeit thought to be made of pressed talc.

The second is Norvasc made by Pfizer for sale in Turkey and not approved for use in Canada.

The third is an approved version of Norvasc made by Pfizer and intended for the Canadian market.

All three versions are being analyzed at a Pfizer lab in Connecticut.

Results are expected within days, said David Malian, the company's director of pharmacy relations.

Drugs manufactured by Pfizer for sale in other countries are not risky in themselves, Malian said.

"What it really boils down to is you've got this closed, very protected pharmaceutical supply chain," he said. "When you have someone introducing product from outside into that closed system, it opens the door up to potential counterfeiters."

The sworn affidavit alleges the two men defrauded Pfizer, private insurance companies, the public, and the Ontario Drug Benefit Program of more than \$5,000 each.

Under the program, eligible patients, including people 65 and older, and those whose drug costs are high compared with their incomes, pay little up front for their drugs.

The pharmacist is later reimbursed by the province.

The Ministry of Health is working closely with the RCMP and the College on the investigation, ministry spokesperson Dan Strasbourg said.

A member of the ministry's OPP investigation unit was involved in the search, and a pharmacy liaison officer has since been appointed by the ministry.

"We invest billions each year providing drugs for Ontarians in need," Strasbourg said.

"It's certainly important to the government that those limited health care dollars are spent helping those in need."

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