



## Cops seize fake heart medication

### Agencies warn patients of counterfeit Norvasc found at King Street West pharmacy

By Daniel Nolan

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The Mounties raided a west-Hamilton pharmacy and seized what they describe as a counterfeit version of a life-saving heart medication.

And police are asking customers who obtained the drug Norvasc from the King West Pharmacy to have it checked by their doctor or another pharmacist. The RCMP and two other agencies raided the King Street drug store Wednesday and seized a quantity of what they say was fake Norvasc. The medication, produced by Montreal-based Pfizer Canada, is used to treat high blood pressure and angina.

While no charges have been laid, authorities said they wanted to alert the public because they do not know how many customers obtained the fake medication and want them to get it refilled with the proper pills.

"We just wanted to get this out because there is a health issue for people that are taking this product if they think it's legitimate and it's not," RCMP Constable Judy Laurence said yesterday.



Barry Gray, the Hamilton Spectator

King West Pharmacy owner Abadir Nasr planned to reopen for business today.

About a dozen officials from the RCMP, the Ontario College of Pharmacists and Pfizer Canada took part in the raid at the pharmacy, which is in the King West Health Centre at King Street West and Margaret Street. They were on the premises for about 12 hours, beginning about 9 a.m.

Police and other officials would not say much more about the situation because of the ongoing investigation. Laurence said charges could be laid in the next few weeks. The college is doing a parallel probe.

Authorities do not yet know how long the medication may have been on the market and where it came from. They would not say how much of the fake medication they seized from the King West Pharmacy.

"Let's just say we took action as quickly as we could because patients are at risk," said Della Croteau, deputy registrar of the Ontario College of Pharmacists. "We're concerned that the patients of the

pharmacy get the care they need ... we just know that's not the Canadian product and not the product for sale in Canada. We don't know the source of the product. We're investigating."

Pfizer Canada told The Spectator a customer from the pharmacy became suspicious about their Norvasc pills and brought it to the company's attention. The firm then alerted the RCMP.

"Let's say you used the drug every day of your life and one day, you open up the bottle and the pills look different," said Pfizer Canada spokeswoman Silvie Letendre. "Would that tip you off?"

The Spectator visited the pharmacy yesterday afternoon and found its doors locked and some staff milling around inside. A knock brought owner Abadir Nasr to the door.

Asked about the accusation fake medication was sold from his business, he said, "It's all under investigation. I think it's all a misunderstanding."

He said his business was closed so staff could clean up from the raid, but he planned to be back in business today.

Customers who did show up to retrieve a prescription were let in and then let out through the locked door.

Nasr declined further comment and told a reporter to call his lawyer. His lawyer could not be located.

According to the Hamilton business directory, Nasr opened the pharmacy in 1992.

A customer, who declined to give her name, visited the pharmacy Wednesday at about 10:30 a.m. to pick up a prescription. She was unable to get in because of the raid and returned yesterday.

"They had all these cops around," recalled the woman, 73. "I walked up to them and they weren't letting anyone in. This female officer, she just said to me, 'Go back to another pharmacy.' "

The woman has used King West Pharmacy for three years and has had no trouble.

"He's been a good pharmacist to me," she added.

Nasr has never been disciplined by the college, but it has placed a warning for his customers on its website. Croteau said the college has provided information to all pharmacies in Hamilton and across the province telling them how to identify the counterfeit pills.

Laurence said police have noticed a trend lately involving medication being passed off to the public under legitimate brand names when they really are "cheap knockoffs" with very little or no medicinal ingredients. Hamilton's King West Pharmacy is the first to have a search warrant executed on it.

"We have several other investigations on the go, but this is all relatively new to us," Laurence said. "This is just an emerging trend we are seeing just in medicine."

She wouldn't say much about the other investigations, but said they were all in southern Ontario and involved other phoney medications.

She could only hazard a guess as to why this is happening. "I guess there's money to be made anywhere in counterfeiting."

Frank Monteleone, Pfizer Canada's vice-president of legal affairs, said Canada has a fairly secure drug

system, but added this is a wake-up call that even Canada's system is not immune to unsafe products.

He said Pfizer Canada was seeing a global increase in counterfeit products.

"I think they're realizing there's significant money to be made (through counterfeit drugs)," added Monteleone.

Croteau was unaware of a trend in fake medicine.

"We're not aware of this at all. This is the first case we've ever become aware of this."

Several Hamilton pharmacists, who declined to give their names, also said they had never heard of counterfeit drugs and believed it was rare.

"That's sensationalism," said one druggist. "I've never heard of anything like that before. You're talking about a name brand drug here. It's just not possible."

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