



Fake drugs pose a threat to Europe's cancer patients

→ Kathy Redmond ■ EDITOR

There is a widespread misconception that the problem of counterfeit drugs is confined to poor countries and/or lifestyle drugs such as Viagra. Yet an estimated one in five Europeans have purchased prescription drugs through illicit channels according to a recent survey by Pfizer. A quick search of the Internet reveals an abundance of cancer drugs, from Arimidex to Zometa, on sale from illegal sites. Given the WHO estimate that, in more than 50% of cases, medicines purchased from these sites will be counterfeit, and that they are being sold direct to the public without a prescription or medical guidance, there is clearly cause for concern.

Counterfeit or 'fake' drugs are unsafe because they are usually low-quality products that contain no active ingredient, the wrong dose of the active ingredient or, worse still, toxic solvents such as boric acid or rat poison. How many deaths are caused by fake medicines is not known, but the dangers are clear.

The import of fake medicines in the EU is fuelled by the potential for high profits. Over a two-month period in 2009, European customs officers seized 34 million counterfeit pills, and fake drugs have entered the legal supply chain in a number of EU countries. Fake Casodex, for instance, has been found on sale via legitimate outlets in the UK. It has been estimated that global sales of counterfeit medicines could top US\$ 75 billion this year – a 90% rise over five years.

European policy makers, regulators, health authorities and pharmaceutical companies have started to wage a war against counterfeit medicines. At an EU level, a series of laws to strengthen regulation in this area is currently under discussion, which will seek to ensure that legally produced drugs have a range of recognisable safety features including anti-counterfeiting packaging (barcodes and seals). Oversight of pharmaceutical distributors and legal Internet pharmacies will be tightened. The European Parliament is also pushing for heightened awareness of the dangers of counterfeit drugs as well as stiffer penalties against drug counterfeiters. Pharmaceutical companies are looking to new technologies that can detect tampering and make it easier to verify whether drugs are legitimate.

Pressure from the US government has led the biggest sellers of domain names to screen customers for online drug sales and delete illicit online pharmacies. This process is proving difficult because rogue online pharmacies may be based in countries outside of the law enforcing jurisdiction.

There is a need to increase awareness of this problem at the level of governments as well as the public, and to enhance transnational cooperation to curb the criminal networks involved in drug counterfeiting. The cancer community should be concerned about the increasing availability of counterfeit drugs and should support current efforts to tackle this criminal activity.