

Dealing with counterfeit

The collective and ultimate responsibility of professionals working in the pharmaceutical world – whether we manufacture, package, market, dispense or prescribe – is to ensure patient safety. Every industry you care to mention has to deal with counterfeit products and perhaps it's inevitable that good brands will always be copied. We've all heard of ten-dollar Rolex watches, five-dollar designer handbags and fake Rolls Royce cars. And sadly there are always customers around who are happy to pay less no matter how inferior the copy is to the original.

For most businesses, including fashion houses and car manufacturers, counterfeit products have huge financial and brand-image implications. A customer who pays cash for a knock-down-price watch on a market stall is unlikely to go to a department store to buy the real thing, so everyone on the original supply chain loses. In true domino-effect, even the company's stock market value can suffer.

And though these implications are just as relevant in the pharmaceutical industry, we have an even bigger priority to consider -- one that literally has life or



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death consequences: patient safety. There's no two ways about it, counterfeit drugs can be dangerous. Whereas official medicines are required to undergo rigorous clinical trials and need to reach the high standards set by government health regulatory bodies regarding tablet hardness, efficacy, packaging, dosages and transportation, the manufacturers of counterfeit drugs follow no rules. Counterfeit drugs do not necessarily do what they claim they will – so, of course, patient wellbeing is at risk.

One common counterfeit method is known as cloning – the product and its packaging look identical to the original brand, but the active ingredient is present in a much lower dose. There

may be none of the active ingredient present whatsoever. Or there may be the same amount of the active ingredient with a diminished efficacy caused by a change in bioavailability because of different excipients or tablet hardness.

The counterfeit drug trade is estimated to be worth \$50 billion annually, making up around 10% of the entire global pharmaceutical market. And it's on the increase. In wealthy countries there's more demand for expensive lifestyle medicines such as hormones, steroids and antihistamines and they're increasingly being sold directly to the public as on-line prescriptions and mail order sales become ever more popular. There are also counterfeit opportunities for middle-men to supply unsuspecting parallel importers who repackage and re-label medicines to suit their own market. In poorer countries the demand is higher for drugs for life-threatening conditions including malaria, tuberculosis and HIV/AIDS. I've heard that up to a quarter of all drugs taken in developing countries are counterfeit and/or substandard.

The biggest challenge in stamping out these counterfeit medicines lies in the fact that they're being made in

countries with less stringent intellectual property rights laws, where penalties are non-existent and in manufacturing plants that don't follow World Health Organisation good-manufacturing practices. Some organised crime gangs find it more profitable than dealing with illegal drugs or guns.

There are solutions, of course. Tamper-evident packs sealed at the point of manufacture make it obvious if the carton has been opened or re-sealed. Radio frequency identification allows packages to be monitored constantly as they move through the supply chain. Standardised barcode systems speed up recall and ensure correct identification procedures.

The bottom line is that we need to be more vigilant than ever. At Durbin we pride ourselves on only ever buying from manufacturers that adhere to the Good Manufacturing Practice standards and from suppliers that hold the Wholesaler Dealer Licence certificate. We also log the quantity and batch number for each and every shipment we make. This ensures all links in the chain are safe and demonstrates that for Durbin PLC patient safety is paramount.

Durbin PLC is a British company based in South Harrow, London. Established in 1963, the company specialises in supplying quality assured pharmaceuticals, medical equipment and consumable supplies to healthcare professionals and aid agencies in over 140 countries. As well as reacting rapidly to emergency situations, Durbin PLC responds to healthcare supply needs from local project level to national scale programmes. Web address: www.durbin.co.uk
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