

Fake medicines: a global threat

Potentially harmful drugs are flooding the UK supply chain. Jean Barry explains how nurses can help to protect patients



COUNTERFEIT MEDICINES are a growing problem in developing and developed countries. In May, the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency (MHRA) announced that £8.6 million of counterfeit and unlicensed medicines, including huge hauls of potentially harmful slimming pills, and controlled drugs such as diazepam and anabolic steroids, had been seized in the UK (MHRA 2014).

In 2013, counterfeit pills worth £12 million were seized in the UK as a result of a global crackdown; investigators confiscated three million doses of unlicensed medicines and 100,000 fake pills, and almost 1,300 UK-based websites were shut down (Gregory 2013).

Counterfeit medicines are not sold just through non-legitimate online pharmacies and other internet sources; they have been found in the legitimate UK supply chain too. Having gone through multi-country routes to reach the UK, they are specifically designed to deceive healthcare professionals and patients so that often only laboratory analysis can reveal that they are counterfeit.

Fake medicines put patients and the general public at risk. Patients are tricked

into believing they are receiving genuine treatment, when instead they are using products that could cause further illness, disability or death, or contribute to the development of resistance to genuine medicines. These drugs may lack the correct active ingredient or contain the wrong dose or even toxic substances, making them ineffective and often dangerous.

As nurses, we need to realise that our patients and the public are the victims of this crime, which can have serious consequences. To help protect them from the harmful effects of counterfeit medicines, we need to provide information and education about the risks and consequences. We must be vigilant for signs of counterfeiting such as improper packaging and labelling, no or limited response to the medicines taken, or unanticipated or adverse reactions.

Nurses also have an important role in educating patients and their carers about the dangers of buying medicines from the internet from non-legitimate pharmacies, or on the street from unauthorised sources. Nurses, and particularly nurse leaders, need to be involved in national

efforts to raise awareness and combat fake medicines, including lobbying for appropriate legislation, drug regulation and law enforcement against fake drugs.

Senior nurses must promote awareness of this globally escalating problem and the need for vigilance in patient interactions whatever the setting. Nurses also need direction on what actions to take if they suspect that fake medicines are in the institutional supply chain or if they are concerned that their patients might have been exposed.

Campaign

The International Council of Nurses (ICN), the federation of national nurse associations in more than 130 countries representing more than 16 million nurses worldwide, has long recognised the importance of engaging the nursing community in this issue. Last year, the ICN was one of the founding members of the multi-stakeholder Fight the Fakes campaign, which now has 26 partners at the most recent count. The campaign showcases the stories of people whose lives have been affected by fake medicines and of those who are working to stop this crime. Fight the Fakes seeks to build a global movement of organisations and individuals who will shine light on counterfeit medicines, and reduce the negative effects of counterfeit medicines on people around the globe.

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References

Gregory A (2013) Operation Pangea VI: counterfeit medicine worth £12 million seized in UK in week-long crackdown. *Mirror*. www.mirror.co.uk/news/uk-news/operation-pangea-vi-counterfeit-medicine-2004827

Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency (2014) MHRA's £8.6 Million Drugs Seizure on BBC1's *The One Show*. tinyurl.com/drugs-seizure

Find out more

The ICN calls on nurses everywhere to join the campaign to fight the fakes. For more information and resources, go to fightthefakes.org