VIEWPOINTS

Counterfeit Medications and Their Negative Impacts on Health Care

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INTRODUCTION

The problem and complexity of counterfeit medications on the health of patients globally is not a new issue. In 2008, Berman¹ referenced efforts to identify and reduce the incidence and influence of counterfeit medications. Berman also pointed out that costs to society are impactful and include losses in employment, lost income and sales tax revenues, and expenses associated with increased trade deficits. Although not new, the counterfeit drug problem is becoming more and more problematic. Global estimates place counterfeit drug use at 10% of all prescription medications used.

Counterfeiters could care less who is impacted by their crimes. Cancer patients, for example, have been adversely impacted. In 2012, the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) indicated 19 medical practices had purchased counterfeit versions of Roche's cancer drug bevacizumab (Avastin) from an overseas supplier.² You name the disease, counterfeit medications have impacted patient quality of life.

The scourge of medication counterfeiting is global in reach and effect. French researchers³ have pointed to not only harmful effects of counterfeit antibiotics upon individual patients, but also the global problems associated with the use of counterfeit medications and the emergence of bacterial resistance with a worldwide impact. After a study in the United Kingdom examining counterfeit medications and use, Jackson and colleagues⁴ urged pharmacists to report suspected incidents to regulatory agencies and to provide advice to patients in all settings regarding counterfeit medications and purchase of such via the Internet.

The involvement of organized crime is readily apparent in counterfeiting. Dégardin and colleagues⁵ noted that counterfeiting is a serious worldwide issue, and the networks manufacturing and distributing counterfeit medications are a component of organized crime.

Medication counterfeiting is a serious worldwide issue, involving networks of manufacture and distribution that are an integral part of industrialized organized crime.

The FDA has been active in working to counteract the negativity of counterfeit use. The CD-3 (top), a small portable device invented by FDA scientists used to detect counterfeit items, is a new device that will allow for early identification of counterfeit medications.⁶ The broad scale use of this type of device will provide accessible identification of counterfeit medications early.

The Partnership for Safe Medication (www.safemedicines.org), an organization led by President Marvin Shepherd, PhD, from the University of Texas, has been an outspoken and effective voice in efforts to identify and combat counterfeit drug use and sale in the United States. This organization needs academic and professional support to continue its effective mission.

Educational outreach from our schools, community groups, the press (any and all forms of media), social networking options, and pharmacy organizations is necessary to provide resources and sources of information to the public on the importance of avoidance of the purchase and use of counterfeit medications. All members of the academy need to play a proactive and necessary role. The true impact of counterfeit medications is unknown, but the ways to reduce counterfeiting need to be known and properly advocated to influence this major quality of life deterrent now and in the future.

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