

## Circulation of Counterfeit Drugs

Tim Fagan is a 16-year-old boy who had been rushed to New York University Medical Center for an emergency liver transplant in February of 2004. Daily injections of Epogen, a medication for the treatment of severe anemia, was given Fagan. However, there was no improvement in his red blood cell count. Moreover, the teen-ager would always complain of severe and painful muscle cramps everytime an injection was administered. Doctors were left in a quandary as to why the medication was not working. It took almost two months before the news broke out that the medication being administered was a counterfeit.

This wasn't a case of a drug that was bought from a local drugstore but from a major national pharmacy chain. Something happened somewhere after the drug left the manufacturing company and before its arrival at the pharmacy. Some unscrupulous moneymakers had taken the low-dose vials of Epogen which cost \$22 and relabeled them as high-dose versions to be sold at \$455. About 110,000 fake vials made it to the market netting the counterfeiters a whopping \$48 million.

You could only imagine the great danger this malpractice had posed in the health condition and life of Tim as well as the stress and anxiety experienced by the boy's parents upon learning of the situation.

In spite of the Food and Drug Administration's assurance that the country's pharmaceutical drug supply is the safest in the world, the increase in the incidents of fake drug seizures and apprehensions has resulted in heightened anxiety and distrust among consumers regarding the safety and genuineness of medicines being sold in the pharmacy.

Some of the fake drugs in circulation are used in the treatment of HIV, Schizophrenia and Anemia. Serostim, a drug that has been approved by the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) for the treatment of AIDS-related wasting syndrome and weight loss, has been found in two pharmacies in California to be counterfeit in 2001.

In the case of schizophrenia, a drug called Zyprexa has been found to be counterfeit in the states of Michigan, Illinois, Minnesota and Wisconsin. Genuine pills were replaced with white tablets which are actually aspirins.

Schizophrenia is a mental disorder where a person exhibits a deteriorated perception or expression of reality usually manifested through auditory hallucinations, paranoia, bizarre delusions and disorganized speech, reasoning and behavior in the context of social or occupational dysfunction.

Zyprexa is a brand name for a prescription medicine that is approved by the FDA for treating symptoms of schizophrenia, acute mixed or manic episodes of bipolar I disorder and for maintenance treatment in bipolar disorder.

Aside from Epogen, Procrit, a widely prescribed drug used to treat anemia in patients with kidney damage and in cancer patients whose lack of red blood cells results from chemotherapy, are found to have counterfeit versions nationwide. Levels of the active ingredient in two treatments were discovered to be 20 times lower than what was actually written on the label.

These are only few of the counterfeit prescription medicines that have been discovered by the authorities. Investigators believe that the worldwide growth of counterfeit and adulterated drug cases in the past decades can be attributed to the increase in sophisticated forged labels, the increase in numbers of small wholesalers buying and reselling medications, and the increasing number of expensive medications that can give forgers large profits.

Manufacturers may not be blamed for the things that happen when the medicines leave their warehouses. Not much has been written on the mortality connected with these deceptive and murderous trade of counterfeit medicines but the danger it poses in the lives of people who are already ill cannot be undermined. In lieu of this morbid scenario, it is imperative that access to safe and effective medications be made available to the general public with the help of proper authorities.

## About the Author

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