

COUNTERFEIT MEDICINES: LOCAL HEALTH TREAT?

Counterfeit medicines are fast becoming a global health issue. At a recent workshop on counterfeit medicines hosted by PIASA, Griffith Molewa, Deputy Director: Law Enforcement, Department of Health, said that both branded and generic medicines are targeted by counterfeiters.

"Internationally, the extent of the problem is huge," says Molewa. "We estimate the global counterfeit industry affects between 8% and 10% of the pharmaceutical market."

These figures are borne out by the World Health Organisation (WHO), which estimates that figures are reaching 25% in some countries, particularly countries with poor regulatory controls. With increasing vigilance in Europe, more than 4.081 million counterfeit medicine packs were seized in 2007, a 51% increase on the previous year. The WHO estimates that approximately one percent of medicines in Europe are now counterfeit.

The World Health Organization (WHO) deems a counterfeit medicine to be "one which is deliberately and fraudulently mislabelled with respect to identity and/or source. Counterfeiting can apply to both branded and generic products and counterfeit products may include products with the correct ingredients or with the wrong ingredients, without active ingredients, with insufficient active ingredients or with fake packaging." [1]

The Internet has opened new doors to counterfeiters, says Molewa. "It's difficult to prosecute online operators, as they close websites down before they can be traced. There are no border controls online, which makes it extremely difficult to stop the process. Products favoured by counterfeiters include lifestyle drugs like steroids and slimming pills, drugs like Viagra, and even essential drugs like those for malaria and HIV."

The extent of the problem in South Africa is unknown. One of the additional challenges for South Africa is the large number of ports of entry (see figure), which are difficult to monitor due to lack of manpower. This means that counterfeit medicines can enter the country from numerous points, thus making importation into South Africa much easier for counterfeiters.

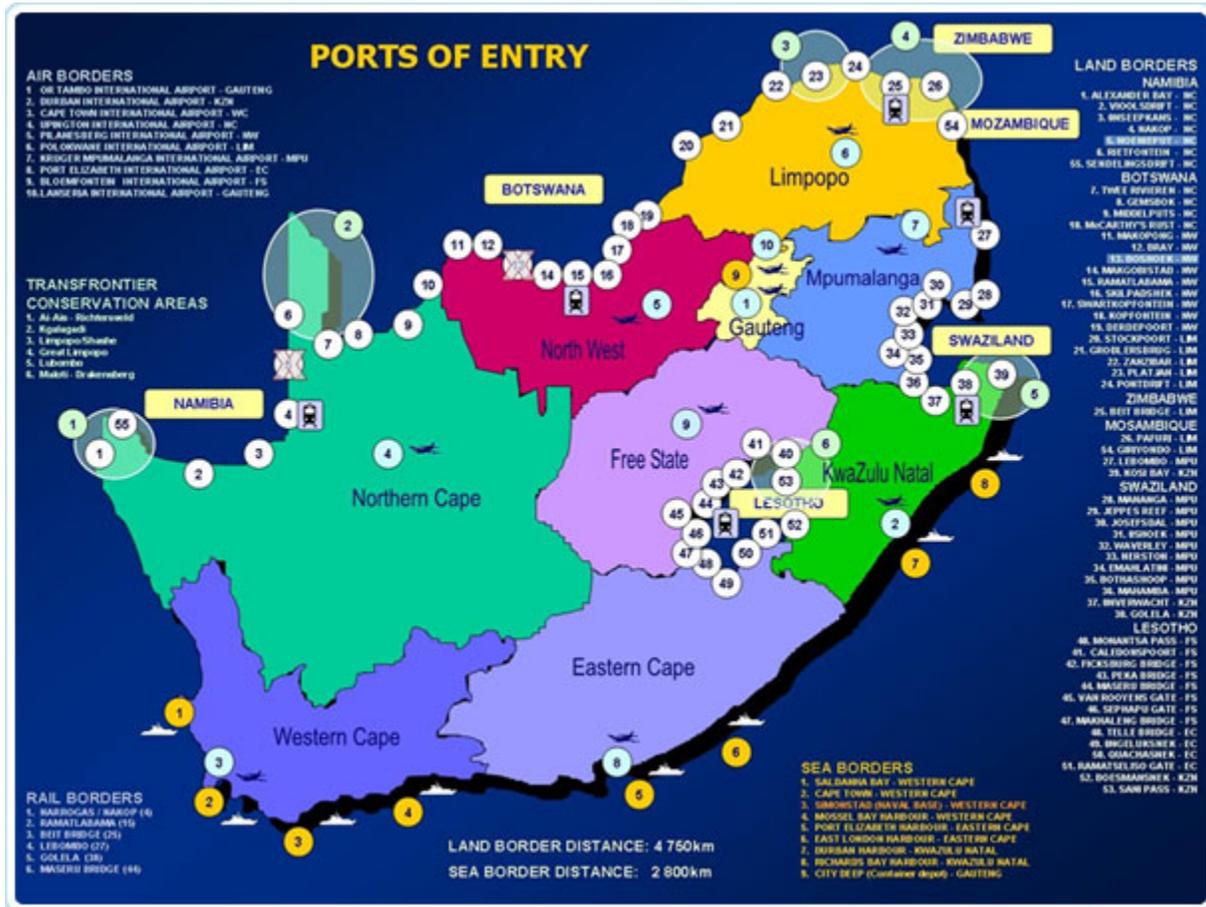
Unfortunately for Molewa and his colleagues, the counterfeit drug business is not seen as a serious crime, locally. While pirated CDs and DVDs get much media attention, South Africans remain largely unaware of the extent of damage this underground 'industry' could do. Molewa says that of only five cases of counterfeiting reported in South Africa in 2008, just two could be prosecuted. Authorities lack any kind of network to assist in identifying such potential offences.

Many fake drugs contain deadly chemicals such as paint or anti-freeze, according to Philip Stevens and Julian Harris, in *Counterfeit medicines - Fraser Forum - May 2009*. Others, they say, contain sub-therapeutic levels of the active ingredients, which can cause drug resistance and make whole classes of drugs ineffective.

"There's also a lack of control of packaging materials, with counterfeiters copying packaging or just creating their own that looks similar," Molewa says. "As an industry, pharmaceutical companies should check their own supply chains and conduct regular audits on both raw materials and suppliers. Health regulatory authorities should also conduct regular audits."

The industry needs both procedures for the destruction of counterfeit medicines and an adequate legal framework to prosecute offenders effectively. Companies also need to blow the whistle. "We need to develop mutual trust between the authorities and pharmaceutical companies, so that more of these suspected crimes are reported. This is not the case," Molewa says.

Healthcare professionals play the key role in identifying potential counterfeit medicines. The crime is largely unsuspected unless healthcare professionals are alert and draw the manufacturer's attention to a suspected counterfeit medicine. Lack of efficacy may in some cases indicate the existence of a counterfeit, while unfortunately, in many cases, drug resistance or more severe consequences can result from the lack of awareness of counterfeit medicine use. Consumers should also be alerted to the potential dangers of accessing medicines through internet websites.



Reference 1
<http://www.who.int/medicines/services/counterfeit/overview/en/>

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