

Counterfeit medicines in developing countries

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The production of counterfeit medicines is a very lucrative crime associated with a growing, but still underreported global health problem. The World Health Organisation estimate is close to 10% but this figure raises dramatically in some developing countries, in which it can approach 50 or even 60% of the national market. The rising threat of counterfeit drugs in poor countries has been attributed to ineffective laws, corruption, loose control systems, short supply, use of non professionals in drug business, ignorance and high cost of drugs. The type of counterfeiting is totally different in these countries in comparison with industrialised countries, mostly -although not exclusively- interested to the so called life style saving drugs. Life saving drugs are instead the most common fake drugs in developing countries, mainly used for the treatment of asthma, diabetes, hypertension, as well as of an array of infectious diseases. Antimicrobials, in particular antibiotics, antimalarial and antituberculosis medicines are often reported as counterfeit and contain very little or even no active pharmaceutical ingredient. Some recent report claims that also counterfeit antiretroviral drugs circulate in Africa. Therapeutic failure is frequently observed, not rarely associated with the death of the patient. Not unexpectedly, there is an emerging issue for drug resistance to pathogens with short life cycles as viruses, bacteria and protozoa, and an increasing threat for population health today and for future generations. Effective intervention strategies are urgently needed to combat the use of counterfeit drugs. The same is true for initiatives finalised to educate students of pharmacy and medicine, health professionals and patients.