

Fighting counterfeiting: the role of AIFA

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In recent years the phenomenon of counterfeit medicines has frequently been reported in the press, however, almost as often the information presented has been distorted and untrustworthy. On the one hand, this situation is the result of the large amount of technical aspects associated with the subject while, on the other hand, it is also due to the large quantity of superficial data which is today accessible via Internet.

Counterfeiting is common across the globe but with varying characteristics. While in developing countries the affected medicines are of the lifesaving kind (vaccines, antibiotics and other lifesaving products), in developed countries counterfeiting was originally encountered in the market of lifestyle medicines such as erectile dysfunction medicines which are often sold outside legal supply chains but more recently has been extended to medicines distributed through authorised pharmacies.

Italy is one of the most active EU MS with respect to counteracting this emerging threat to public health: the intersectoral formal cooperation schemes activated more than 10 years ago, as the IMPACT Italia task-force, allowed to face emerging dangers such as the infiltration of the "grey" and borderline products distribution channels, rogue e-pharmacies, diversion of stolen products.

AIFA is leading many international initiatives in the field, managing a complex network that is the key tool for the counteracting activities: successful AIFA projects such as the EC supported Fakeshare, focused on counteracting the illegal distribution of medicines through the web and, in general, pharmaceutical crime, underline the need for proper cooperation and information sharing between all stakeholders.

The impressive results achieved in 2013-2015 are a good demonstration of the power of cooperation and information sharing: the shutdown of hundreds of illegal websites, the frequent joint operation (AIFA/police/health authorities/laboratories) in non pharmaceutical shops, the eradication of hospital thefts, are all related to the collaboration schemes set up between Italian administrations, health professionals and private stakeholders.