

# Discussion

The risks of buying prescription medicines online, many of which are counterfeit or substandard, seem to be gaining an increasing number of column inches. But how serious a danger to patients is this really?

## Comments (1)

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**GP and president of the European Men's Health Forum**

Imagine for a moment a man choosing to buy medicines online in an attempt to treat his erectile dysfunction, too embarrassed to see a doctor. I use this example as one quite commonly associated by consumers with the purchase of medicines via the internet.

Whether or not he sees any clinical benefit, if he's lucky he'll avoid counterfeits containing shoe polish, rat poison and other nasties. But more than that, if his problem was due to the fact that he is (unknowingly) a diabetic, or is suffering from cardiovascular dysfunction, he will get neither the proper diagnosis nor the life-prolonging medicine he already desperately needs. In fact, he may then go for years without help, until his disease has worsened considerably and has a significant negative impact on his life.

As a General Practitioner and prescriber, this issue is very close to my heart. Of all the risks and potential harm to patients caused by medicine counterfeiting, by far the most serious aspect at present is missed diagnosis.

This means essentially that each time a patient sources and purchases a prescription medicine online, not only is there a greater than 60 per cent chance that the product they receive is fake, counterfeit or clinically substandard, but vitally they remove themselves from the protection of their healthcare system.

Only a trained healthcare professional is qualified to make a full diagnosis of all and any illness, and thereafter write a prescription, if required, for a specific dose of a specific medicine. The dangers of side-stepping this can be serious.

As it stands today, the law in Europe seems to offer colander-like protection at best for patients against the scourge of counterfeit medicines. As a doctor, but also a member of the board at the European Alliance for Access to Safe Medicines ([www.eaasm.eu](http://www.eaasm.eu)), I am aware of sterling efforts ongoing to bring the matter to the attention of Europe's policy makers and a wealth of other key stakeholders.

The EAASM published a report in 2008 called *Counterfeit Superhighway*, the research for which revealed that if you choose to step outside the safe harbour of your regulated healthcare system to buy a prescription medicine online, there is a 62 per cent chance you will receive a counterfeit product as a result.

As fake medicines may contain too high or too little doses of active ingredient, as well as quite a creative, if disturbing, range of 'filler ingredients', this risk alone is clearly not one worth taking.

The EAASM is now disseminating its new report, *Packaging Patient Protection (PPP)* to European Parliament and the world's media, which gives recommendations to European lawmakers (currently discussing revisions to the law as part of the European Pharmaceutical Package).

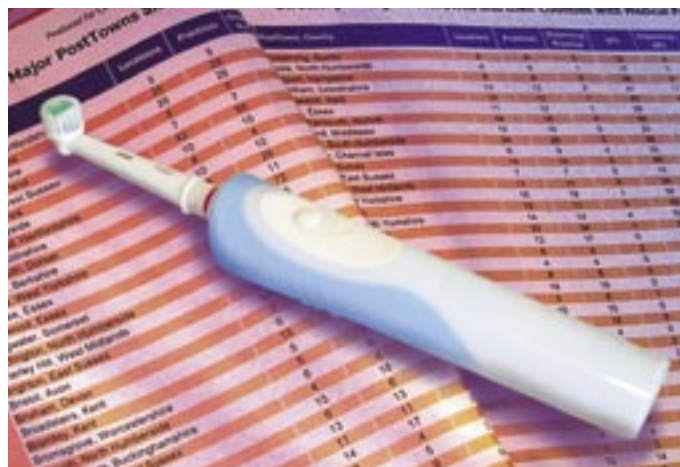
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These measures are highly valuable because until those most at risk are protected, educated and empowered to shun the internet as a source of 'medication' in favour of the full attention of a qualified physician and regulated healthcare system, missed diagnosis will remain the key danger in this detestable business of medicine counterfeiting.

Missed diagnosis is a real issue in medicine counterfeiting. Without responsible, effective communication of the risks to vital stakeholders in the European Parliament and beyond, reaching as far as the patient, this danger will only persist and worsen.

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