

Counterfeit Drugs

Counterfeit Drugs or counterfeit medication are medicines created with the sole purpose of deceiving the general public in terms of its origins, effectiveness and authenticity.

The issue of Counterfeit Drugs has been in the news lately due to the reason that the Covid-19 pandemic has accelerated the growth of counterfeit drugs in the Indian pharmaceutical market.

This article will give details about Counterfeit drugs within the context of the IAS Exam

Overview of Counterfeit Drugs

A counterfeit drug will contain either deficient quantities of the necessary ingredients or they may be of substandard quality. In addition they may contain active ingredients that are not even in the label.

Consumption of these drugs may lead to adverse effects on human health such as antibiotic resistance and may even lead to death. Drug manufacturers are increasingly finding ways to come up with countermeasures to combat the menace of counterfeit drugs. Methods such as better traceability and authentication of packages are employed, but counterfeiters are escalating their game as well.

Covid-19 and Counterfeit Drugs

The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has only aggravated the serious threat posed by counterfeit drugs. The reason being that the recent public health crises has skyrocketed the demands for medical supplies.

Moreover, the pandemic has created a disruption in the supply chains of medicine and reduced, to an extent, the time needed to regularly test new drugs, making it difficult for genuine products to find their way in the market. To fill the void, illegitimate drugs are taking their place.

The result is that illegal online pharmacies and allied services are now finding it easier to sell their counterfeit wares to the desperate public.

The rollout of COVID-19 vaccines have opened new opportunities in lieu of fake vaccines for the disease. The situation came to a head when Interpol issued a global alert in December 2020 to law enforcement agencies all over the world warning them to be on the lookout for organised crime syndicates involved in creating fake COVID-19 vaccines.

What is the impact of Counterfeit Drugs?

The impact of counterfeit drugs can be summed in the following points:

- Since counterfeit drugs have bad quality ingredients or no active ingredients. Its consumption will have adverse effects on the patient's health.
- As per the European Union's Intellectual Property Office proliferation of counterfeit drugs cost the European pharmaceutical companies 10.2 billion every year.
- The data from the World Health Organisation shows low and medium income country populations are more at risk from pharmaceutical fraud. There is a potential of a looming public health crisis in these nations as the consumption of counterfeit drugs will increase.

India and Counterfeit Drugs

As per data from the EU Intellectual Property Office India accounts for most of the counterfeit drugs produced in the world.

Industry body ASSOCHAM (Associated Chambers of Commerce and Industry) wrote in the paper "Fake and Counterfeit Drugs In India –Booming Biz" that fake drugs constitute US\$4.25 billion of the total US\$14–17 billion of domestic drug market. Around 25% of India's drugs are fake, counterfeit or substandard.

The ASSOCHAM report also estimates that the domestic fake drug market is growing at an astonishing 33% per year, from 30.0 billion rupees (\$678.5 million) in 2005 to 40.0 billion rupees last year (2020). The worst offenders in terms of quality control are government hospitals, where about 38% of drugs are fake, nearly double the national average. It also believes that 60% of fake drugs in India contain no active ingredients, 19% have the wrong substances and 16% include harmful and inappropriate ingredients, such as talcum powder.

The group estimates the damage to the country's economy from all classes of counterfeit goods at 150.0 billion rupees, from an estimated turnover of 300.0 billion rupees. The worst market in terms of counterfeiting is gold and precious materials (India has the world's highest level of private gold holdings), followed by entertainment software piracy and recorded music.

Conclusion

As mentioned above, drug manufacturers are using custom packaging and better authentication techniques to better protect their products from counterfeit practices but illicit drug manufacturers are working with specialists who can replicate both custom packaging and authentication efforts.

It remains to be seen how well can counterfeit drugs be combated in the present scenario of a looming pandemic.