

# Counterfeiting in the Time of COVID

**With the circulation of fake coronavirus medicines claiming to prevent or cure COVID-19, along with illegitimate tests and protective equipment, proof of originality and authenticity is perhaps more important than ever**

Mike Isles at ASOP and Marietta Ulrich-Horn at Sekurikett

The demand generates the offer. Where there is an acute lack of protective equipment, testing, and medication in the fight against the coronavirus, product fraud is growing rapidly (1-3). Even in exceptional times such as these, criminals do not shy away from putting counterfeit and inferior goods into circulation, directly putting the public, healthcare workers, and patients in harm's way.

Often, in the race against time, less attention is paid to where the goods have come from. For control and authentication of products, simple and quickly verifiable indicators are needed to determine where the goods come from and whether they are genuine.

Special care should be taken when buying products on the Internet, a popular platform for selling counterfeit products. Here, you can also encounter companies that do not deliver the goods after prepayment, or simply put unsafe replicas or completely ineffective products on the market.

Especially now, when drastic measures are being taken to stem the spread of the virus, safe protective equipment that meets the prescribed standards is essential. Nobody wants to imagine what will happen if counterfeit protective equipment does not have the promised properties to intercept the

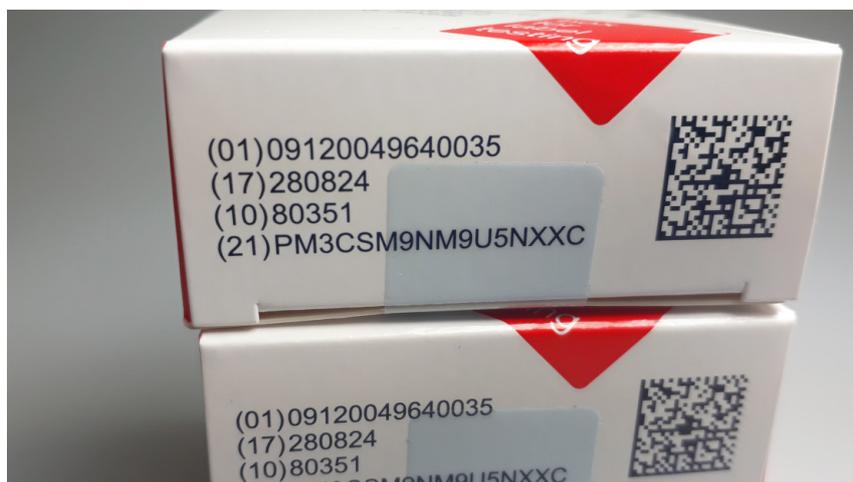


Image 1: The Falsified Medicines Directive requires a unique identifier to verify the authenticity of each medicines plus an anti-tampering device. In this case a VOID label

viruses. Especially when they are used in hospitals, where staff have daily direct contact with infected persons.

Fake tests that give false or unreliable results prevent containment of the virus. People who are thought to be healthy can transmit the virus unhindered and the spread cannot be stopped. Devastating consequences that would overwhelm even the best health care systems would result.

Criminals target all types of products knowing that the profit margins will be high. Fake airbags and unsafe toys to name but two areas. It has been said that to sell fake medicine is 20,000

more profitable than selling narcotics on the street and with laws that mean punishments are far less severe, it is no wonder that this sector of health care is targeted so frequently.

All types of medicine, for example counterfeit spare parts for medical devices or respiratory equipment cannot always fulfil the desired function if they are of insufficient quality. It is also important to kill the myth that only lifestyle medicines are bought online. That is not the case at all. Looking at 2,300 respondents from a survey carried out by ASOP EU when asked what medicines they wanted to buy, it is quite clear that all types of medicine



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In Europe, the Falsified Medicines Directive requires every prescription pack to be uniquely serialised with a bar code as well as having a tamper evident seal since February 2019 (5). At point of dispensing, the pharmacist then checks the pack to be authentic and also checks that the tamper evident seal has not been compromised.

are being bought, such as antibiotics (which is very concerning when linked to the rise of antimicrobial resistance), anti-cancer treatments, blood pressure lowering medication to name just three (4).

of individuals who are buying medicines online?

In 2017, WHO characterised these and stated that adverse events due to incorrect ingredients gave rise to:

- A failure to cure or prevent future disease, thereby increasing mortality, morbidity, and the prevalence of disease
- The progression of antimicrobial resistance and drug-resistant infections
- A loss of confidence in health care professionals, health programmes, and health systems
- An increase in out-of-pocket and health system spending on healthcare
- Lost income and productivity due to prolonged illness or death

In recent years, numerous regulations have been rolled out across many countries in the world that enable authentication traceability of individual serialised prescription medicines. Additionally, these regulations often insist on tamper-evidence devices to give twice the protection.

This directive is so important as it greatly enhances the security and integrity of the legitimate supply chain. Additionally, the directive obliges every member state in the EU to sell ‘medicines at a distance’ and the retailer (in most cases pharmacy shops) must register with their national health authority. Also, if they are selling medicines via the Internet, then each page of their website must display a logo – described as the common logo – which, when clicked on, routes through to a page that shows it has been registered.

Each member state (MS) is legally obliged to inform the public of the purpose of this common logo and to explain what a falsified medicine exactly is. ASOP EU has held a number of meetings with the MSs to share the various advertising campaigns, but it soon became clear that many MSs are not carrying out public facing

What are the health consequences and impact on the hundreds of thousands



Image 2: Technically highly complex labels encourage the user to check the authenticity of products in a user-friendly way and it is intuitive and motivating to do so. As for instance this label changes irreversibly when it is peeled off from a package, uncovering an additional code. The user, equipped with a smartphone, is guided through the verification in a self-explanatory manner

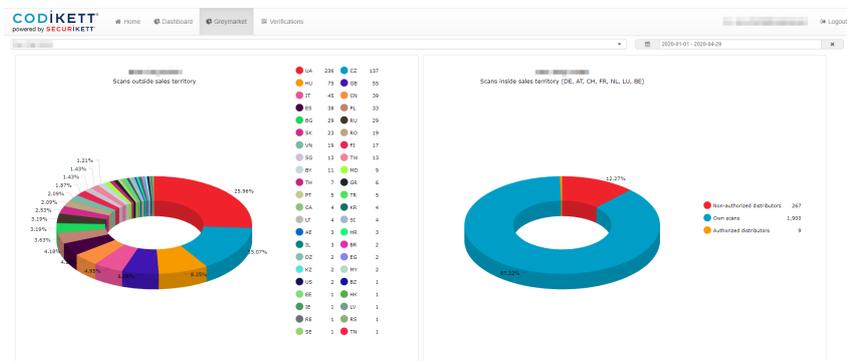


Image 3: When users scan products for authentication or other attractive applications, valuable statistical information can be collected. Right holders receive early warning indicators when e.g., products are deviated from their destiny markets, opening a gap for falsified products to enter the supply chain



Image 4: Opened locks visuals appear when the user opens the medicine. Language-free, self-explanatory symbols document the initial opening. The security printing uses VOID technology and the hologram, as on banknotes, also makes the originality obvious

# PMPS

information campaigns. We would urge governments to address this issue and create campaigns to raise awareness.

In response to the newly released report by the EU Intellectual Property Office (EUIPO) and the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) entitled 'Illicit Trade in Counterfeit Pharmaceutical Products,' Mike Isles, Executive Director of ASOP EU, a non-profit patient safety organisation dedicated to making the Internet a safe place to buy medicines (where it is legal to do so) said at the launch conference, that 'demand is fuelling the supply', after all, it is you and I who are going online to buy medicines, if we did not then there would be no market and no need for criminals to supply. With medicines being sold via social media and with 96% of the 35,000 websites selling medicines worldwide operating illegally, it is a problem that urgently needs solutions (5-6).

"There is no 'one silver bullet' so it requires many silver bullets and coordination amongst a myriad of public- and private-sector partners. And with an estimated 130 million people potentially buying medicines across Europe urgent action is needed. This is especially important as we see false and predatory promises and misguided advertisements around potential



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treatments or cures for COVID-19 as well as fake tests as well as medical devices".

It follows, therefore, that that manufacturers and users should protect themselves equally by means of good identification marking, proof of originality, protection against tampering of the packaging, and by paying attention to secure distribution channels.

#### References

1. Visit: [www.who.int/news-room/detail/31-03-2020-medical-product-alert-n-3-2020](http://www.who.int/news-room/detail/31-03-2020-medical-product-alert-n-3-2020)
2. Visit: [www.ema.europa.eu/en/news/covid-19-beware-falsified-medicines-unregistered-websites](http://www.ema.europa.eu/en/news/covid-19-beware-falsified-medicines-unregistered-websites)
3. Visit: [www.fda.gov/news-events/press-announcements/coronavirus-covid-19-update-fda-alerts-](http://www.fda.gov/news-events/press-announcements/coronavirus-covid-19-update-fda-alerts-)

*consumers-about-unauthorized-fraudulent-covid-19-test-kits*

4. Visit: [eaasm.eu/public/downloads/OKH3E/EAASM\\_ASOP%20EU%20Spring%20Newsletter%202019.pdf](http://eaasm.eu/public/downloads/OKH3E/EAASM_ASOP%20EU%20Spring%20Newsletter%202019.pdf)
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**Mike Isles** is the Executive Director for the Alliance for Safe Online Pharmacy in the EU, a non-profit Community Interest Company. With over 30,000 fake pharmacy websites targeting Europe on any given day, this multisectoral organisation's mission is to enable patients to buy their medicines online safely – where it is legal to do so. Its members and observers involve many key internet stakeholders. Its aim is to produce concrete voluntary actions that will make a real difference and ultimately benefit the health and safety of patients.



**Dr Marietta Ulrich-Horn** holds a PhD in philosophy from the University of Vienna, and an MBA from the Vienna University for Economics and Business, Austria, and the Carlson School of Management, US. She is co-founder and CEO of **SECURIKETT**®, a company offering a wide range of product protection solutions: complex security labels for physical product protection, and the digital cloud solution **CODIKETT**® for track and trace in global applications. **MILLEPEDIA**®, one of the latest IT product developments, makes interoperability possible.



Image 6: VOID tapes ensure that a shipping carton can be checked to ensure that the contents have not been opened in transit. This ensures that the original contents cannot be replaced with counterfeit products