

Coronavirus: global crackdown sees a rise in unlicensed medical products related to COVID-19

This year's operation identified a disturbing trend of criminals who are taking advantage of the COVID-19 outbreak by exploiting the high market demand for personal protection and hygiene products.

Operation Pangea XIII took place from March 3 to 10 and involved police, customs and health regulatory authorities from 90 countries, all aiming to prevent the activity of illicit online sales of medicines and medical products. Counterfeit face masks and unauthorised antiviral medication were all seized under the operation.

Globally, 2,000 online advertisements related to COVID-19 were found and more than 34,000 unlicensed and fake products, advertised as "corona spray", "coronavirus medicines" or, "coronaviruses packages" were seized. Whilst there were no coronavirus related products found to have reached UK borders on this occasion, Operation Pangea aims to tackle serious organized crime globally and the MHRA plays a big role in ensuring unlicensed medicines and medical devices are not making their way onto UK markets.

In the UK the MHRA Enforcement team and colleagues from UK Border Force found 871,616 doses of unlicensed medicines with a value of £2.6m and additionally took down 294 websites and removed 1031 social media adverts online offering medicines illegally. Working alongside police officers the MHRA team executed seven warrants leading to two arrests as part of investigations linked to the illegal online sale of medicines, resulting in the seizure of anti-anxiety, sedatives and weight loss products.

Fake medicines included anti-depressants, erectile dysfunction tablets, painkillers and anabolic steroids all seized by officers from the MHRA and UK Border Force. The seizures were part of Interpol's globally coordinated Operation Pangea targeting the illegal sale online of fake and illegal medicines and devices.

The majority of seizures made during the operation were unlicensed copies of erectile dysfunction medication totalling 611,888 doses. Other significant seizures included medicines to treat insomnia (88,160 doses) and pain relief medication (26,005).

Mark Jackson, Head of Enforcement at the MHRA, said:

Criminals who sell medicines and devices illegally are not only breaking the law but have no regard for your health and will take advantage of a major public health crisis to make a profit. Taking fake or unlicensed medicines and using a non-compliant medical

device could put your health and safety in danger and may lead to serious health issues.

Our intelligence-led operations across the UK have seized millions of fake and unlicensed medicines. The MHRA is committed to working with our international partners and UK Border Force to prevent fake medicines from entering the UK and to identify illicit websites offering to sell and supply medicines and medical devices illegally.

The MHRA's [#FakeMeds](#) campaign aims to encourage people in the UK who choose to buy medication online to take steps to make sure they are purchasing from safe and legitimate sources. The campaign also highlights the dangers of fake medicines sold online and the negative health effects that taking them can have. It also encourages people to report suspected dodgy drugs, and any side effects experienced to the [Yellow Card scheme](#)

MHRA safety advice when buying medicines:

Be careful when buying medicines online

Medicines and medical devices are not ordinary consumer goods and their sale and supply is tightly controlled. Websites operating outside the legal supply chain may seem tempting, for example prescription medicine is offered without a prescription. Not only are they breaking the law – they are putting your health at risk.

Do not self-prescribe

Self-diagnosis and self-medication can be very dangerous. If you have a concern about your health, visit your GP, get a correct diagnosis and if medicines are prescribed, buy them from a legitimate source.

Visit the [#FakeMeds](#) website for tools and resources to help people purchase medication or medical devices safely online.

Ends

Notes to Editor

1. [Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency](#) is responsible for regulating all medicines and medical devices in the UK by ensuring they work and are acceptably safe. All our work is underpinned by robust and fact-based judgements to ensure that the benefits justify any risks.
2. MHRA is a centre of the [Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency](#) which also includes the [National Institute for Biological Standards and Control \(NIBSC\)](#) and the [Clinical Practice Research Datalink](#)

[\(CPRD\)](#). MHRA is an executive agency of the Department of Health and Social Care.

3. Operation Pangea is an international initiative to target the illegal internet trade in medicines. It was instigated by the MHRA in April 2006 and started as the UK Internet Day of Action (IDA). The annual operation is the largest internet based enforcement action of its kind to date and was coordinated by INTERPOL, together with the World Customs Organisation (WCO), the Permanent Forum of International Pharmaceutical Crime (PFIPC), the Heads of Medicines Agencies Working Group of Enforcement Officers (WGEO), Europol and the Pharmaceutical Security Institute (PSI), and supported by the Center for Safe Internet Pharmacies (CSIP) and private sector companies including LegitScript, Google, Mastercard, Visa, American Express and PayPal.
4. The [#FakeMeds](#) campaign is a public health campaign which aims to reduce the harm caused by purchasing fake, unlicensed or counterfeit medical products online. The current phase the #FakeMeds campaign focuses on the issue of fake erectile dysfunction (ED) medicines and raises awareness of the prevalence of fake ED medicines online, encouraging audiences to buy from legitimate sources. Previous phases of the campaign have focused on dodgy diet pills and fake self-testing STI kits. Follow #FakeMeds on [Twitter](#), [Facebook](#) and [Instagram](#)
5. The [Yellow Card scheme](#) helps the MHRA monitor the safety of all healthcare products in the UK to ensure they are acceptably safe for patients and those that use them