

Internationally Controlled Drugs and the Unregulated Market

This chapter highlights the dangers of unregulated markets for the distribution and sale of drugs in many parts of the world. Unregulated markets are characterized by unlicensed individuals or entities trading in drugs in contravention of applicable laws. The drugs that they sell are of unknown or doubtful source, quality, safety and efficacy and, not surprisingly, these unregulated markets become sources for obtaining pharmaceutical products containing internationally controlled drugs for abuse purposes. There are several factors that promote the existence and spread of unregulated markets including, in some countries, limited access to health care facilities, public ignorance of the health risks associated with their patronage, inadequate drug control regulations and/or inadequate enforcement and consumer demand for drugs. Unregulated markets obtain their supplies of drugs from thefts or unauthorized sales, including through unlicensed Internet pharmacies. The Internet has now become a major distribution channel for drugs with online sales of medicines containing internationally controlled substances increasing substantially over the past few years. A recent global survey carried out by the National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University in the United States revealed that a large majority of Internet pharmacies are unlicensed and unregulated; in reality they should not be considered or called pharmacies but seen for what they are, which is commercial drug-trafficking operations. Most of these online outlets supply and sell internationally controlled drugs, particularly benzodiazepines and opioids, drugs that are highly sought after by drug abusers. Some 89 per cent of the Internet pharmacies surveyed did not require a prescription from their customers. Eight per cent accepted prescriptions sent by telefax which not only carries a high risk of prescription falsification but also allows customers to re-use the same prescription to buy drugs from several Internet drug-selling outlets at a time. Only 3 per cent of online drug sellers operated in accordance with international standards, only accepting mailed prescriptions or indicating that the prescribing doctor would be contacted. Specifically, for most Internet sales outlets, anybody with access to a credit card, including children, can easily obtain any medicine, including controlled drugs. The risks of purchasing counterfeit medicines from unregulated markets are high. While the problem of counterfeiting is not new, it has now assumed significant proportions both in developing and developed countries as demonstrated by the World Health Organization's estimate that 25 to 50 per cent of medicines used in developing countries may be counterfeit. The recent third Global Congress on Combating Counterfeiting and Piracy, held in Geneva in January 2007 noted the expansion of illegal trade in fake pharmaceuticals.

Unscrupulous manufacturers, importers, exporters, pharmacists, distributors and brokers have all been implicated in counterfeiting of drugs and medicines. This constitutes an economic crime which undermines national health care systems, results in loss of confidence of drug control systems and enforcement of drug laws. Most importantly, it also poses serious health risks to consumers. The spirit of this publication is to increase understanding of the international drug problem so that we can tackle it rationally and more effectively. The topics of the various chapters are inevitably interrelated and there is therefore some repetition between them, reflecting the fact that all of the issues are integrally connected via the three international drug control conventions, which are themselves complementary. The core principle running through both the chapters of this book and the provisions of the conventions is the importance of ensuring the availability of controlled drugs for scientific and medical purposes while, at the same time, protecting the public from drug abuse and related problems.