

Field Report from India

Adapted from the broadcast audio segment; use the audio player to listen to the story in its entirety.
In many countries the rationale for combating counterfeit products is as simple as saving lives. This is especially true in India. As one of the world's largest manufacturers of generic medicines, India has become a prime target for those selling and producing counterfeit drugs.

The city of Agra is typically known for the Taj Mahal, but it's gradually becoming famous for something else – fake drugs.

A former drug counterfeiter named, "Raj" explains how he sold his product.

"One cough syrup named Benadryl. We used a local syrup of water and sugar with the same smell. The seal copied, label copied, boxed and taped, all copied. Nobody could tell the difference."

Fake medication is not new here. India's thriving legitimate drug industry has meant easy access to drug expertise and manufacturing technology. "Today, if you want to sell fake drugs," says Suresh Sati, "You just have to know who to ask."

Sati is a private investigator in Delhi, 130 miles north of Agra. He's been chasing counterfeiters for more than 30 years. In his basement office, he pulls out samples of counterfeit products. He's busted small timers who use med mixers in back alleys as well as big time criminals, such as mafia rings.

Mafia rings here used to traffic primarily in narcotics but they realized that police are much more harsh on those selling heroin than on people selling fake Benadryl. The profit margin and the ease of production has the counterfeit drug industry booming.

"The problem is growing day by day," says Sati.

The problem grows while the Indian government struggles to keep pace. With over half a million pharmacies in India and more than 10,000 manufacturing facilities, regulation of the drug industry is a huge challenge for the government.

Some Indian pharmaceutical companies contribute to the law enforcement effort but many people like Barun Mitra, head of the Liberty Institute, a think-tank based in Delhi, question their commitment to stopping criminals.

"Suppose the media publicizes that a particular well known company in India's products are being pirated. All the products of that company are going to collapse. The consumer is going to be so scared that they will drop the whole product range of the company."

Mitra says, Indian pharmaceutical companies face a big dilemma.

It's not just the domestic market Indian drug companies are worried about. Almost half of all drugs manufactured in India are sold outside of India. Leena Menghaney, program director with Doctors Without Borders, says policy that focuses on intellectual property and trademark comes at the expense of safe, quality drugs.

"We find that the whole campaign on counterfeits does not focus on quality. It focuses on intellectual property."

Prafull Sheth, general secretary of the Southeast Asia Pharmaceutical Forum, thinks bringing the conversation back to quality may also be the key to cleaning up India's drug industry at home.

"If you look at all the substandard, the adulterated, the spurious and the counterfeits, they will all fall under one large category of quality. Maybe people would be more comfortable to talk about it as a 'quality' issue rather than a 'counterfeit issue.' The minute you mention 'counterfeit,' then people would take it back. They would like to say, 'Let's talk about some other thing because you know it will hurt my image.'"

For India's growing pharmaceutical industry image is crucial but it isn't everything. People's lives are at stake says Mitra.

"If it can be presented that ordinary Indians who are taking medicine whom might actually suffer very badly then the political establishment might look at this somewhat differently. Then the chances of enforcement improves."

For a developing country like India, the long term solution must go beyond just chasing counterfeiters. Improving healthcare and decreasing poverty would help put counterfeiters out of business. Today, just 60% of India's one billion people can afford quality drugs. For the rest, counterfeits may be their only option.

– Reported by Ann Kim for America Abroad