

## Counterfeit drugs latest public health hazard in US

The recent recall of 130 000 bottles of counterfeit atorvastatin (Lipitor) tablets by a US distributor has signalled a new hazard to public health — the diversion of illegally obtained, mislabelled, diluted, expired and even contaminated drugs into the American pharmaceutical supply system.

The issue is of interest north of the border because American critics of Canadian Internet pharmacies say there is a risk US buyers will be purchasing counterfeit products. But the reality, says Andy Troszak, is different.

“To my knowledge there has not

been a single counterfeit issue within Canada,” says Troszak, vice-president of the Canadian International Pharmacy Association. “There’s a larger potential for a US citizen to be exposed to counterfeit drugs by purchasing them within the United States than by getting them from within Canada.”

Nevertheless, Health Canada issued a warning about the fake Lipitor July 7. Spokesperson Krista Apse said Canadians could unwittingly buy the drug while visiting in the US or via the Internet. Health Canada’s Ryan Baker says counterfeiting appears to be an American phenomenon. “We are not aware of any cases in Canada,” he said.

In alerting consumers about the recent recall, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) noted that the fake Lipitor posed a “potentially significant risk.”

Where the counterfeit pills originated remains a mystery, but the FDA said they

probably did not contain the 10-mg dose their labels claimed.

Neither company involved in distributing the pills would comment, but a spokesperson for Pfizer Inc., which earned US\$8 billion through Lipitor sales in 2002, said counterfeiting of its products, including Viagra, is increasing.

Asked if the drug counterfeiting emerging in the US is likely to occur in Canada, Philip Rosenberg, president of the Canadian Association for Pharmacy Distribution Management, said there has been “little if any counterfeit activity to date.”

He attributes this to tougher regulation of distributors, who are governed by the same regulations as drug manufacturers and are inspected regularly by Health Canada. Police background checks are also required for those in charge of any Canadian wholesale drug operation. — *Milan Korcok, Florida*

### New features added at eCMAJ

To make *eCMAJ* more useful for clinicians, a series of new services and enhancements has been added in recent months.

- “Email this article to a friend” allows for the rapid transfer of *CMAJ* papers among physicians.
- The Browse Columns feature allows users not only to check their favourite columns, such as Clinical Vistas, but also to search for articles.
- Top 10 articles is designed to let physicians know which articles their colleagues consider most important.
- eTOC on Palm allows PDA users to receive the latest *CMAJ* table of contents, including abstracts of research articles and full-text versions of the Practice section and the Editorial. It allows users to manage all of the HighWire journals they follow on their PDA using a single application. Twelve other journals, including the *BMJ*, offer this feature.

In an unrelated development, Google started indexing *CMAJ* at the end of March — a tip of the hat from the world’s top search engine. (Google now refers more visitors to *eCMAJ* than any other referring site.) *eCMAJ* is also indexed by MSN and Yahoo. — *Holly Bodger, eCMAJ*

## Slow-burning smokes become a hot item

Health Canada is considering regulations to reduce the number of fires caused by cigarettes. If all goes as planned, new reduced ignition propensity (RIP) cigarettes could be on the shelves within 2 years. The Canadian Association of Fire Chiefs says about 70 Canadians die each year in fires caused by careless smoking, and another 400 are injured; 95% of these fires are caused by cigarettes.

In February the Commons Standing Committee on Health considered input about RIP cigarettes, and Health Canada has until the fall to produce recommendations for new regulations. Myriam Monrat, associate director of the Office of Regulations and Compliance at Health Canada’s Tobacco Control Program, says the regulatory process could take 18 months.

One of industry’s principal objections is that RIP cigarettes may be more toxic than regular cigarettes. But tests show that Merit, the world’s first RIP cigarette, is not significantly more toxic, says Monrat. Released by Philip Morris in the US in July 2000 and in New Zealand in April 2001, Merit has a significantly reduced potential to cause a fire. It sports bands of ultra-thin paper applied on top of traditional cigarette paper, and they act as “speed bumps” to slow the combustion rate.

In August 2000, New York State became the first jurisdiction in the world to pass legislation mandating RIP cigarettes (*CMAJ* 2000;163[5]:588). In Ontario, cigarettes, cigars, pipes, lighters and matches caused 9.5% of fires between 1995 and 1997, but 40.8% of fatalities. Cooking equipment caused 26.5% of fires and 12.4% of deaths. The difference is probably related to careless handling while under the influence of alcohol or drugs. — *Barbara Sibbald, CMAJ*



RIP: so far, Merit is the only reduced ignition propensity cigarette