

Online pharmacy crackdown shuttered 1,677 websites

27 June 2013, by Tom Murphy

U.S. and international regulators have seized more than \$41 million in illegal medicines worldwide and shut down 1,677 websites as part of their ongoing fight against counterfeit drugs sold over the Internet.

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration said Thursday it used federal court warrants to seize website domain names and post messages letting visitors know that people who traffic in [counterfeit drugs](#) may face severe penalties under federal law. The message also offers a link to a site—www.fda.gov/BeSafeRx—that explains the risks of fake [online pharmacies](#).

Experts say the Internet is filled with illegitimate, professional-looking sites that peddle drugs. The FDA launched a campaign last fall to warn consumers that the vast majority of online pharmacies do not follow laws or pharmacy industry standards and their products could harm or even kill.

The moves the agency announced Thursday took place as part of Operation Pangea VI, a weeklong [crackdown](#) organized by the international police agency Interpol that ended Sunday.

Investigators visited the websites and used undercover IDs to order the drugs. They received counterfeit drugs that were not approved by the FDA. Some arrived with no directions for use and in strengths and quantities not available in the United States. Some also had different ingredients than the real drugs, which can be very dangerous to the patients taking them.

"You essentially have no idea what it is that you would be buying and what you would be taking," said John Roth, director of the FDA's Office of Criminal Investigation.

Illegal medicines found online include the diabetes treatment Avandaryl. They also include versions of

the impotence drugs Levitra and Viagra called "Levitra Super Force" and "Viagra Super Force" that are not approved by the FDA.

Online sales of those erectile dysfunction treatments can be especially enticing to patients who may be too embarrassed to visit a [drugstore](#) to buy the drug in person.

Roth said consumers should watch for red flags that indicate an online pharmaceutical website may not be legitimate. They include sites that offer steep discounts from a drug's regular price, those that don't require a prescription to fill your order or ones that contact you through a spam email.

"This is a constant struggle for us, but one of the most important things we can do is educate the consumers about what a legitimate website looks like," he said.

A January study by the National Association of Boards of Pharmacy, which accredits online pharmacies, found that only 257 of 10,275 online pharmacy sites it examined appeared legitimate.

Last year, Operation Pangea V resulted in the arrests of about 80 people and the seizure of \$10.5 million in medicines. In addition more than 18,000 illegal pharmacy websites were shuttered.

Roth said there were no arrests in the latest operation, but the investigation is continuing.

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