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Investigating the Circulation of Counterfeit COVID-19 Medications

Dr. Turck:

Coming to you from the ReachMD Studios, this is *COVID-19: On the Frontlines*. I'm Dr. Charles Turck.

The following is a brief news summary on the growing number of counterfeit medicines linked to COVID-19, as reported by the BBC.

Amidst the race around the world to stockpile medical supplies, China and India, which are the two largest producers, are still wrestling with the fallout from their lockdowns, which has disrupted global supply chains and resulted in a shortage of medicine. But *another* aftereffect of the lockdowns is the circulation of ineffective or adulterated drug products that are now filling the gaps in global markets.

Following the World Health Organization's declaration of the coronavirus as a pandemic, Operation Pangea, Interpol's global pharmaceutical crime-fighting unit, made 121 arrests across 90 countries in just seven days, and agents seized illegal pharmaceuticals that are estimated to be worth over 14 million U.S. dollars.

The organization's Secretary General, Jurgen Stock, said, "The illicit trade in such counterfeit medical items during a public health crisis shows a total disregard for people's lives."

And Pernette Bourdillion Esteve from the World Health Organization unit charged with cracking down on falsified medical products, says "Best case scenario, the fake medicines probably won't treat the disease for which they were intended. But worst-case scenario, they'll actively cause harm because they might be contaminated with something toxic."

But it's not just the illegal pharmaceuticals that are putting lives at risk.

Like other medical supplies, prices of the raw ingredients necessary to produce many lifesaving drugs have soared. One producer stated that, typically, the materials to produce the antimalarial drug hydroxychloroquine, whose use in COVID-19 is controversial, cost about 100 U.S. dollars a kilo. But today, the cost has increased to \$1,150 a kilo.

The steep increase in cost of ingredients is thought to be due, in part, to White House briefing statements touting chloroquine and its derivative, hydroxychloroquine, as potential treatments. The demand, which began to outpace global created circumstances on which opportunists, profiteers, and other bad actors pounced.

Fake chloroquine began circulating, causing one expert at the University of Oxford to issue a warning that the problem would only increase unless governments around the world present a united front. That expert, Professor Paul Newton is quoted as saying "We risk a parallel pandemic of substandard and falsified products." Visit [BBC.com](https://www.bbc.com) for the full story.

For ReachMD, this is *COVID-19: On the Frontlines*. As always, to add your perspectives on the fight against this global pandemic, visit us at [ReachMD.com](https://www.reachmd.com) and become Part of the Knowledge. Thank you for listening.