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Need to fight counterfeiting harder due to COVID-19 crisis

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Every year, World Health Day is celebrated on April 7 aiming to build a strong primary health care system. There are various issues, which need to be addressed including achieving UHC, ensuring availability of affordable and quality health services.

Achieving this is difficult without eliminating sub-standard and falsified medicines from the system. According to a study by the International Institute of Research Against Counterfeit Medicines (IRACM), globally, counterfeiting has been measured as about \$200 billion problem in terms of statistics.

Even at this pandemic situation, while all stakeholders in the health community are putting their best effort in fighting it, there is a group of people making hay while the sun shines. Counterfeiters thrive in situations where there is enormous demand and restricted supply, and such a situation is now present, especially when it comes to specific categories of essential products such as pharmaceuticals and medical supplies like masks, gloves and sanitizers. There have already been incidents reported of people selling fake sanitizers and masks at huge profits to unsuspecting consumers. As this crisis unfolds, it is only to be expected that many more such incidents arise.

So, what is to be done about this? We believe protecting against counterfeits is everyone's responsibility, especially at this time. Below are some measures that each of us can take to minimize the overall threat.

Government

Ensuring that consumers are not duped by counterfeit products, especially those related to health, should be of primary importance for the government at this critical time. We would suggest a few measures for regulators at the central and state level:

- Create awareness that the risk of being exposed to counterfeiting is much higher while the country is battling this pandemic and that in a rush to buy sanitizers, masks or other essential products, it is possible that one may be buying a harmful or ineffective counterfeit product.
- Empower and train law enforcement personnel to be alert to such incidents and a crackdown on people selling these products
- Encourage and create incentives for genuine manufacturers and sellers of products in high demand to reduce the scarcity and thus drive down the profitability for counterfeiters.

Brands

Brands need to play bigger responsibility, as a brand is built on trust. If that trust is eroded, especially at a time when consumers need it most, it could have long-term impacts on business. It is, therefore, of vital importance for any brand owner to take steps to protect their brand at this time. Some suggestions are listed below:

- Many brands are already communicating with their customers, whether it be to express solidarity in this time of difficulty, to inform them about the disruption of supply, or to offer advice. It is imperative for brands to also consider the risks of proliferation of knockoffs at this time, and to communicate it accordingly. Such proactive thinking of the welfare of loyal customers can only serve to strengthen trust, not just now but in the long-term as well
- There are two broad ways to protect against counterfeiting – secure the supply chain and enable authentication. A layered combination of physical and digital security solutions is always recommendable.

Consumers

- As consumers, there is a big responsibility on each of us. Before and after buying any product, we must participate in completing the authentication process. As we rush to buy a mask or a malaria medicine or a bottle of hand sanitizer, we should be alert that there is a possibility, perhaps even a probability, that we could get duped. We should buy from trusted places and always ask for a bill.
- We should participate in the authentication process provided by Brands. If none is provided, we must ask why. We should demand protection from the government and our trusted brands.
- If we do unwittingly purchase a counterfeit, we must report it to the brand or a consumer rights forum. We shouldn't allow such incidents to go unreported as it may encourage those who profit from illegal acts

As experts said, “In the midst of every crisis, lies great opportunity”. We are in the midst of one today, and we must ensure we take the opportunity to protect ourselves and our loved ones – protect them against the pandemic by taking the recommended precautions, but also protect them against the harm of these illegal, harmful, counterfeit products. Together, we can emerge stronger, safer and healthier.

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