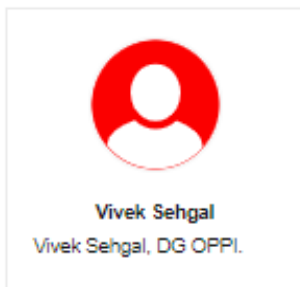


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INDIA

## Counterfeit drugs: A major public health threat

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In terms of volume, India's pharmaceutical industry ranks third in the world<sup>1</sup>. However, there have also been multiple incidents of counterfeit medications and drugs hitting the market<sup>2</sup>. Globally and in India, the pharma industry has been grappling with issues related to counterfeit or spurious drugs for a while now; however, these have been amplified post the pandemic. To further bolster India's image as the "Pharmacy of the World", all stakeholders must work together to ensure issues such as counterfeit drugs do not dent this image.

### Counterfeits Affecting Pharma Reputation

This battle isn't new for the industry, but the events of the last few years signal the need for intervention. COVID-19 caused massive disruptions in global supply chains, which led to countries around the world struggling to source life-saving medicines. This phase also led to a rise in the sale of sub-standard or dubious drugs. One of the related causes was that the pandemic accelerated the adoption of online marketplaces for the purchase of medication and other pharma products. The proliferation of such online marketplaces has brought greater customer ease, but it also enables a higher volume of counterfeit or sub-standard products to go undetected. According to research published by the non-profit Authentication Solutions Providers' Association (ASPA)<sup>3</sup>, which promotes anti-counterfeit awareness, instances of substandard and falsified (SF) medical items increased by about 47% between 2020 and 2021.

Counterfeit drugs and their circulation tend to prove detrimental to the growth of the pharma industry, which can only flourish based on quality and trust. The recent instances of substandard pharma products leading to fatalities have the potential to cause serious damage to the country's reputation as a pharma exporter, and it is high time we take the right steps to safeguard India's image in the global pharma landscape.

## Public Health Concerns

Substandard products across industries are a marketplace reality, anywhere in the world including India. But what sets pharma counterfeit apart is the potential for life-threatening damage. In addition to increased morbidity and mortality, counterfeit products might also worsen drug resistance and lead to treatment failure. Fake medications place the user's health at grave risk; but they also adversely hit the entire pharma industry's reputation, operations, and finances. The World Health Organisation (WHO) also estimates that there are over one million deaths per annum from counterfeit and substandard drugs, causing \$21 Billion of global financial impact<sup>4</sup>. In a 2017 report, the organisation also claimed 10.5 per cent of medicines sold in low and middle-income countries, including India, were substandard and falsified which is a serious threat to patient safety<sup>5</sup>.

Pharmaceutical products contribute 8 per cent to India's overall merchandise exports and 2 per cent to India's gross domestic product (GDP)<sup>6</sup>. Safeguarding India's image as a trusted, reliable supplier of pharmaceutical products is imperative to realise India's ambition of '*Atmanirbhar Bharat*'.

## The Way Ahead

It is in the larger public health interest that all stakeholders, including consumers, need to stay watchful of substandard and counterfeit drugs. India's pharma industry should focus on creating effective communication collaterals to develop a vigilance mindset amongst consumers. Concerned government bodies should also actively promote programmes focusing on patient safety and awareness through the strategic use of media.

Anti-counterfeiting measures at manufacturing locations are the need of the hour. A higher focus is called for to strengthen production quality and supply-chain controls through the usage of available technologies. Manufacturers should consider the adoption of blockchain-based pharma solutions to ensure higher quality control across the value chain – vendors, distributors, bottling and packaging and retailing. Pharma manufacturers should aim for a rigorous, traceable, permanent serial numbering process for every item of medicine. Adoption of measures such as track-and-trace technologies, mass serialisation with QR codes, etc can help restrict substandard or counterfeit medications from reaching domestic product shelves and international borders.

India exports more than a trillion rupees worth of pharmaceutical products annually. The global pharma industry, by the end of 2029 is expected to grow to over \$2.4 Trillion from \$1.40 trillion at the end of 2021<sup>7</sup>. With such a large volume already sailing to different international territories, and more likely in the coming years, it is advisable the industry takes note of recent, unfortunate incidents and prioritises anti-counterfeit measures on an urgent basis.