Bogus medicine menace demands strong Rx

by The Indianapolis Star

They can mass-produce pills that look for the world like the erectile aid Cialis or the anti-psychotic Zyprexa, slick packaging included.

They can advertise on state-of-the-art Web sites with official-looking logos of government approval and other assurances of "authenticity."

The drugs they sell may contain any combination of ingredients, including fillers and toxics. They're made under squalid conditions in the Third World without inspection. There's a good chance they'll make the customer sick, and an excellent chance they won't have the dosage or purity to treat what already ails him. Pharmaceutical counterfeiting is a $30 billion global business, expected to double by 2010; and it is busily diversifying from the so-called lifestyle drugs such as Cialis to life-saving medications for hypertension and heart disease. "It can be more profitable to deal in counterfeit pills than in heroin," says Michael Muller, director of global anti-counterfeiting operations for Eli Lilly and Co. "And the penalties are less."

The good news is that the United States is far less infected with the scourge than other parts of the world, including Europe. The danger, says the U.S. pharmaceutical industry, is that the guard will be lowered by well-intentioned legislation.

Matters get dicey here, because one person's protection is another's protectionism.

Counterfeiting is one reason the industry opposes efforts in Congress to allow individuals and businesses to import lower-priced prescription drugs from abroad. The industry's bottom line is, understandably, another reason. While consumer advocates have been quick to portray the first concern as a smoke screen for the second, both sides of this volatile political issue need to treat counterfeiting as a problem all its own.

Support for importation legislation, which died in the Senate last year, continues to build in an election year. Hillary Clinton, Barack Obama and John McCain have lent their blessing, as have key Senate and House members. Unanswered thus far, however, is the question of how large a security task would be created by dropping the barrier against mass drug shipping into the U.S., not to mention how to pay for expanded inspection forces. Lilly alone spends $1 million a day fighting counterfeiting.

With or without legalized importation, counterfeiting is a huge economic and safety threat that Americans cannot escape and law enforcement agencies are not staying ahead of. Given the volume of contraband, medicinal and otherwise, "It's like drinking from a fire hose," Muller says. That's bad enough when it's fake designer purses and music CDs. When it's a product that can cure or kill, all necessary resources - along with

politics - must be set aside.

Reprinted from The Indianapolis Star â€“ CNS.

Bogus medicine menace demands strong Rx by The Indianapolis Star