

Pharma cos build immunity against counterfeiters

MUMBAI: Pharmaceutical technology companies are bracing to mount another offensive against counterfeiters, armed with new platforms and more stringent laws. The idea is to throw as many hurdles as possible in the path of counterfeiters to reduce the ease with which they make fake drugs and infiltrate the market, say industry players.

Bilcare Technologies has designed a device to detect fake drugs and Ideal Cures has added more colours to tablets to make counterfeiting difficult. While manufacturers lose a huge part of their revenue to counterfeiters, consumers contract additional complications and some lose their lives due to harmful ingredients used in fake drugs.

Bilcare Technologies, technology division of Pune-based Bilcare Research, will soon launch a hand-held device that will help detect fake drugs. Based on non-clonable technology, the customisable device can be placed at chemist shops for consumers to scan a product to check whether it is fake.

"The product has gone through rigorous pilots and could be launched in a few months. Pilots already conducted have given a good response and pharma companies are enthused about the product," said Praful Naik, executive director at Bilcare Research.

The unnamed device, which company sources say is likely to cost \$100 (around Rs 5,000), will scan a product for a tamper-evident, non-clonable tag. Since the tag's fingerprint is generated in a random manner, it is difficult to copy, claims the company.

The tag can be embedded in any kind of packaging and modularly integrated with communication platforms. This tag will be read through a proprietary scanning device that will transmit an encrypted image through a universal mobility platform to a secure signature server, enabling authentication as well as tracing of a product.

Such a product will help check spread of fake drugs, which analysts estimate to have penetrated up to 30% of the domestic market. Globally, the turnover of counterfeit drugs is expected to reach \$75 billion the end of 2010, up 90% from 2005 levels, as per estimates by World Health Organisation (WHO).

In another technology-led innovation to check counterfeiting of drugs, tablet-coating firm Ideal Cures has introduced multi-colour tablet-coating. "It is easy for counterfeiters to duplicate both packaging and colour of an original product. But, at present, all tablets are only single-colour. Multi-colour coating is more complex to copy," Suresh Pareek, managing director of Ideal Cures, told ET.

The company has filed several patent applications for this technology, which, it says, can be easily integrated into a pharma company's manufacturing process.

The amended Drugs and Cosmetics Act provides for stricter punishment for companies charged with manufacturing adulterated or spurious drugs. Under the new law, evidence of both adulteration and manufacture of spurious drugs needs to be established for a person to be convicted.

Punishment for the offence has been increased to 10-year imprisonment from five years, and could extend to life. The fine has also been increased to Rs 1 lakh from Rs 10,000.

However, the use of innovative technologies will not rid the country of fake drugs. Experience shows that a new method of combating fake drugs impedes the efforts of counterfeiters for only a couple of months, till they buy the new equipment used by pharma companies and make it impossible for a layman to pick out a fake drug.

“Counterfeiters are only six months behind us. While these technologies won’t put them out of business, they certainly will slow them down. Combined with new legislation and whistleblower policy, it will be more difficult for counterfeit drugs to find their way into the market,” said Ranjit Shahani, chairman and managing director of Novartis and president of the Organisation of Pharmaceutical Producers of India (OPPI). The challenge lies in making various agencies and stakeholders work in sync, he added.