

Illegal animal medicines a global concern, says report

By Mark Ross

A report on illegal veterinary medicines estimates that annual global losses to legitimate companies are between US\$1 billion to \$2 billion, and warns of a growing black market for pet drugs.

Illegal veterinary medicines are found in both developed and developing countries, and can have adverse effects on human food safety and security, antimicrobial resistance, as well as the control of animal-borne disease, articulates the report by global animal medicines association, HealthforAnimals.

These medicines include counterfeit, falsified and unregistered products, and unapproved parallel imports. Compounded pharmaceuticals and illegal autogenous vaccines, when not manufactured or used appropriately and according to regulations, are also included.

New Zealand's animal medicine and crop protection industry association, Agcarm notes that the rapid growth in online sales, and a parallel growth in international trade – especially of small packages – has created opportunities for trade in illegal veterinary medicines.

This affects all regions, including the major markets of the United States and the European Union, where the main issue is online sales of pet medicines, including illegal internet pharmaceuticals.

In New Zealand, illegal medicines are currently not regarded as a major issue.

Agcarm works constructively with online auction site, Trade Me to remove illegal veterinary medicine products from sale. Most recent examples include pet flea treatments, products decanted into plastic containers without labels, and products not registered for animal use. The main culprits being owners' of companion animals (equines, cats and dogs).

The risks of buying illegal products are very high. They can cause health issues for animals and people, especially if food is treated with illegal veterinary medicines. They can also lead to less effective control of zoonotic infection, and risks of increasing antimicrobial and anti-parasitic resistance.

To avoid these repercussions and ensure effective treatment, animal owners are urged to purchase from reputable manufacturers and suppliers, and choose only authentic veterinary medicines when buying online, or via distributors.

The government is encouraged to take action against illegal medicines. An industry-government task force might offer a solution for ensuring that illegal products are identified and where known offenders are prosecuted.

One solution to this issue is to develop an industry-wide database to identify trends in the sellers and channels of illegal medicines. This could be used to alert Customs and other government agencies on the scope of the problem.

The database could also be used for crop protection products, due to rising amounts of illegal products found around the globe. The road to gaining awareness of the trade in illegal products is a long one. But Agcarm is willing to collaborate with industry and government in finding a solution and determining the best way forward for New Zealand. First and foremost, we must ensure the health and safety of both animals and people.

Findings

The report's findings include:

- A conservative estimate of annual global losses is between US\$1 billion to \$2 billion.
- Widespread and large use of illegal veterinary medicines found in the developing countries of south-east Asia, India, Africa and Latin America.
- A growing black market of drugs for pets, particularly in the EU and US.
- Illegal veterinary medicines present in both developed and developing countries, with negative effects on human food safety and security, resistance and control of animal-borne disease.
- Illegal veterinary medicines likely to contribute to antimicrobial resistance development, where sub-therapeutic doses of an active pharmaceutical ingredient are used for animals.

The report can be accessed from the [HealthforAnimals website](https://www.healthforanimals.org/).

<https://www.healthforanimals.org/resources-and-events/resources/publications/169-illegal-veterinary-medicines-impact-and-effective-control.html>

- Mark Ross is chief executive of Agcarm, the industry association for companies which manufacture and distribute crop protection and animal health products.