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Health check

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Nanotech reader to check spurious medical products

Consumers can check authenticity of drugs and devices with 'signanotures'

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Counterfeit medicines and medical devices have ailed the domestic industry for quite some time. Though there are no accurate statistics available, experts say that counterfeit medicines make up as much as 3% of the over Rs 33,000-crore domestic drug market. Some experts peg their share at 10% and higher.

The World Health Organization defines counterfeit medical products as those fraudulently mislabelled, or those with wrong ingredients, without active ingredients, fake packaging, or insufficient ingredients.

Such spurious medicines harm not just the industry but also consumers. Now, help is at hand for conscientious consumers. From the second half of 2009, consumers of medical products and devices will be able to check the authenticity of the medicines they buy,

thanks to a new packaging technology. They will be able to check the authenticity of the manufacturer, the date of manufacturing, and the expiry date of the product.

Derived from nanotechnology, this counterfeit detection technology will be customised for every drug and medical device, including stents, catheters, sutures, etc.

Praful Naik, the chief scientific officer of Bilcare Ltd, the company that has developed the technology, said a tag or sticker manufactured using the technology called 'signanotures' would be affixed onto medicines and medical devices. This tag will be a permanent marker on the pack of any medicine or device. "The pack of drugs or medical device is then swiped against a reader -- a pen-like device that helps authenticate the product. This reader is connected to a central server," said Naik.

He added that the message flows from the medicine or medical device pack to the reader and then to the server. The server will verify the manufacturer, date of manufacturing, date of expiry of the medicine or medical device, and the message will flow to the consumer's mobile phone.

"It will be designed in such a way that people can download the software on their mobiles. So within seconds of swiping the pack on the reader, a consumer or doctor will know the validity of the medicine or medical device. If the data provided is not consistent with what's on the pack, consumers can be alerted and can choose not to use the product," said Naik.

Consumers can do this check at the chemist or pharmacist before buying. The readers will be first available in medical stores. "They will be affordable so people can buy them and use when required," said Naik. Currently, the company is working on the entire supply chain of this technology, right from creating the tags to customising the technology for individual products.

Experts said though the technology would help counter the menace of counterfeit products, it would take a while to appear feasible to people. "Pharmacists need to buy the reader and so do consumers. So it's a long-drawn process," said Daara Patel, secretary general of the Indian Drug Manufacturers' Association (IDMA).

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