**Jeopardising Public Health**

**This clandestine business has been going on for decades in the country with the connivance and support of enforce-ment agencies.**

[Malik Muhammad Ashraf](https://www.nation.com.pk/columnist/malik-muhammad-ashraf)

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It is indeed extremely worrisome to note that some unscrupulous people in their quest to earn easy money and become billionaires are playing with the health of the people by producing and marketing counterfeit and spurious drugs. This has been going on for long and no government has done anything plausible to stop this heinous business. It is very rare that one comes across the news about raids on facilities that produce such drugs.

A few days ago health officials and FIA acting in a joint action located an illegal medicine-producing unit in Islamabad involved in the production of counterfeit and spurious drugs and sealed it. During the raid, some employees were also arrested while the owner himself was not available there. It is believed that the owner was running similar facilities in some other cities. Investigations are continuing where the medicines produced in the facility were being delivered so that they could be recalled.

This clandestine business has been going on for decades in the country with the connivance and support of the enforcement agencies like the gambling dens and drug peddlers are patronized by the police stations of the area. In both cases, huge money exchanged hands between the criminals and the concerned authorities. It is very rare that one hears about a swoop on the manufacturers of spurious and counterfeit drugs. I remember that I was a student of 10th class in 1964 when for the first time I heard about the production of counterfeit and spurious drugs consequent upon a similar raid on a factory in Karachi. The incident made headlines and the people really appreciated the performance of the health authorities thinking that it would act as a deterrent for the unscrupulous elements to indulge in such a crime in the future. That expectation was false. The business kept thriving and now it is an open secret that most of the pharmacies and medical stores sell these counterfeit and spurious drugs produced in these illegal units because the margin of the profit is very high. So the producers and sellers of these medicines are a well-established mafia in Pakistan notwithstanding the fact that these medicines have far-reaching implications for public health, safety, and the economy.

These medicines contain injurious ingredients or no active ingredients at all and the administration of these drugs may lead to treatment failure, exacerbation of health conditions, development of drug resistance, and even death. I remember a horrible incident involving the death of a journalist and TV anchor about four decades ago whose name was probably Idrees Baig. He was given an injection purchased from a medical store in front of Mayo Hospital Lahore which deteriorated his condition and finally his death. The production of counterfeit and spurious drugs is the most heinous crime against the state and society. But who cares? We are the most corrupt society. The corruption at the top level of the government has had its trickle-down effect and consequently, it has almost become a vicious circle from which the exit seems almost impossible.

The Drug Regulatory Authority of Pakistan (DRAP) does recognize the severity of the problem and feels that this issue requires coordinated efforts involving regulatory reform, enhanced enforcement mechanisms, public awareness campaigns, and international cooperation to effectively combat the proliferation of counterfeit drugs and safeguard the well-being of the population. Very right but I think they conveniently neglect the fact that all the measures suggested by them are effectively neutralized by the all permeating corruption.

It is not only a case of people’s health being jeopardized by spurious and counterfeit drugs but there are also other mafias who are involved in destroying the health of the people to earn easy money. Adulteration of food items is another thriving business undertaken by the people bereft of humanitarian faculties. These days milk made from chemicals is also being marketed with impunity and it is very difficult to get pure milk from the milk outlets in the cities. Like drugs, the sellers earn a lot of profit and those marketing it also get a fare share of this ill-earned money at the cost of public health.

The rulers are busy in building their own fortunes through the in-built avenues of corruption in the system of governance and it is because of their corruption that the entire society has become afflicted with corruption and corrupt practices. Human values and morality are at their lowest ebb.

I do not subscribe to the often-preferred view that such activities are undertaken secretly at unknown places and it is difficult to eradicate the menace altogether. Only fools would give credence to that idea. I know for sure that all the police stations have their own intelligence gathering system and the Station House Officers are fully aware of the illegal activities happening in their areas. But they look the other way in spite of taking action against them or sharing information with the concerned regulatory authorities because the money makes the mare go. As I said the major factor in regard to failure in controlling crimes like this is the permeating corruption among the regulatory authorities themselves as well as the Police stations. If they were corruption-free then nobody could dare to indulge in such anti-social and anti-state activities.

Looking after the health of the people is the basic and constitutional obligation of the state and the governments running the state affairs. Unfortunately, the governments have absolved themselves from performing their constitutional duty by allowing private investment in the health sector. As a result, there has been a mushroom growth of private hospitals where the treatment is almost beyond the reach of poor people. The condition in the government hospitals is very pathetic wherever they exist. This situation has also contributed to a great extent to the proliferation of counterfeit and spurious drugs.

It is indeed a very serious and regrettable situation and I am of the considered view that there is no possibility of eliminating these scourges from society until and unless our rulers mend their ways, and reform the archaic colonial system of governance that promotes a culture of graft and entitlement. If rulers continue to indulge in corrupt practices then it will be hoping against hope to see these evils going away. I do not see any such hope in the near future. Well, I am not a pessimist but my observations are based on existing stark realities.

**Malik Muhammad Ashraf**The writer is a freelance columnist. He can be reached at ashpak10@gmail.com