

Are you sure your medicine is genuine?

ORGANISED crime is muscling in on the pharmaceutical industry with groups as diverse as the Mafia and al Qaeda benefiting from the proceeds of peddling counterfeit drugs, according to a new report from a leading European think-tank. As many as 200,000 people across the world are thought to die each year from taking fake medicines, and the UK is set to become one of the syndicates' prime targets.

The report, published by the Stockholm Network, will heighten existing concerns that the NHS is being targeted by ruthless counterfeiters keen to exploit the £10 billion annual drugs budget.

UK regulatory authorities have recalled two lots of fake medicines this year — the impotence treatment *Cialis* and the slimming drug *Reductil* — and others are under investigation. But the problem is much worse in the States. The US Food and Drug Administration now has to deal with four times as many fake drugs as it did in the Nineties.

Recent cases include salt water being substituted for growth hormone, a batch of *Zyprexa*, a treatment for schizophrenia, which contained nothing but aspirin, and a consignment of nearly 200,000 packets of fake *Lipitor*, a drug widely used to prevent heart disease and stroke.

Counterfeit drugs have been around for years but until recently they have mainly been confined to less developed countries, which scrutinise them less closely — as many as four out of 10 samples of some malaria treatments contain no active ingredient. But today's counterfeits are so con-

Counterfeit-drug gangs are targeting Britain

MEDICAL NOTES

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vincing they can fool experts, and gangs are turning their attention to the more lucrative markets in Northern Europe and the US.

Recent changes in the way drugs are dispensed and prescribed here have made their job much easier. To save money, GPs now prescribe generically, using the active ingredient of a medicine rather than the brand name. As a result patients get used to being given different versions of the same drug, so fakes are likely to go unnoticed.

So what can you do to protect yourself? Never buy anything off the internet unless it is from a reputable pharmacy and prescribed by your own doctor — half of all *Viagra* sold on the internet is fake. If you are on prescribed medication, the chances of being given a fake in the UK are currently tiny, and there is little that you can realistically do to reduce the odds further — the only reliable sign may be that your asthma, blood pressure or arthritis takes an inexplicable turn for the worse.