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Charity drug shipments get clean bill of health

Despite concerns, Haiti and other needy nations get medicines that are not expired and usually are needed

By Steve Sternberg
USA TODAY

Concerns that drug companies and charitable organizations ship expired or inappropriate drugs to needy countries are largely untrue, though problems do exist, says a study out today.

Sponsored by a coalition of drugmakers and medical aid agencies, the study was designed to examine the validity of assertions that expired or inappropriate drugs — those that weren't ordered or needed — were shipped to countries in dire need of medical help.

Such reports swirled around efforts to aid earthquake vic-

tims in Mexico and Armenia, war victims in Sudan and the poor in Russia.

A 1997 article in the British medical journal *Lancet* claimed that 50% to 60% of the drugs donated to Bosnia-Herzegovina between 1992 to 1996 were inappropriate.

Lead investigator Michael Reich of the Harvard School of Public Health and his team tracked more than 16,000 donations shipped by two charitable organizations to 129 countries between 1994 and 1997. Researchers also did in-depth case studies in Armenia, Haiti and Tanzania.

The 280-page analysis found that the drugs had a median

shelf life of 589 days before expiration. About 70% had more than a year of shelf life left. But 6% had a shelf life of 100 or fewer days.

No shipments of expired drugs were found, Reich says. "That is a new finding and something that indicates that the conventional view that only expired drugs are being shipped is certainly wrong."

He adds that most of the shipped drugs were needed. The percentages that were not ranged from 10% to 42%, depending on the country.

Reich acknowledges that some health facilities had expired drugs on their shelves, but he says that may be caused

by the length of the "distribution chain," from drugmakers' warehouses to air carriers, from air carriers to customs agencies, and from customs to patient-care providers.

The study didn't gauge corruption's effects on the process. Jim Russo of the Partnership for Quality Medical Donations, the group that sponsored the study, regards the study as "kind of a benchmark."

He says he was surprised "by the degree to which many of these small countries rely on donated drugs. Drug donations are not just an oft-again, on-again thing in some of these countries. They are an ongoing part of ordinary health care."

The partnership is made up of several drug companies and such aid organizations as Project Hope, AmeriCorps and the Catholic Medical Mission Board. Reich says the study's sponsors did not influence the outcome of the study.

Sister Maura O'Donohue, a physician and director of programming at the Catholic agency, says World Health Organization guidelines for drug donations, published in 1996, require that drugs be at least one year from expiration.

Now, she says, the agency is rethinking that policy, because many countries are so desperate that medicines are used almost as soon as they arrive.

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Study faults some drug donations

THE FINANCIAL TIMES

Up to two-fifths of drugs donated to developing countries were not requested by the recipient governments, while about one-third were within a year of their expiration date, says a survey to be published today.

The two-year study, carried out by the Harvard School of Public Health, follows reports that "inappropriate" medicines, such as lip balm and anti-smoking devices, were shipped to refugee camps in former Yugoslavia.

Critics have suggested that pharmaceutical companies, spurred by tax breaks, use donations to clear their warehouses of old drugs. Because of poor distribution systems, especially in times of war or natural disaster, drugs often expire before they reach patients, saddling recipient governments with the cost of destroying them.

Dr. Michael Reich, author of the study sponsored by the Partnership for Quality Medical Donations, a consortium of pharmaceutical companies and non-governmental organizations, said most donated drugs were useful and with a sufficient shelf life.

But he said a significant proportion of donations did not meet these criteria, a problem that should be addressed through better communication between companies, aid groups and governments.

"There's no question that tax breaks provide an incentive for companies to make donations," Reich said. The intention, however, was for taxpayers to subsidize the redistribution of drugs to needy countries, not to encourage dumping.

Reich also said it was not easy to determine the appropriateness of a drug. "It's certainly conceivable that refugees who leave everything behind might need lip balm."

He also said it might be appropriate to supply drugs with less than a year to go before expiration — the cut-off point recommended by the World Health Organization — if recipient countries could make swift use of it. The Harvard study found that 6 percent of drugs sent had only 100 days of shelf life left.