



PRESS STATEMENT

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Ensuring high quality of medicines remains a challenge for PNG

Most antimalarial and antibiotic drugs available from public health facilities in PNG are of good quality however, there were a few import exceptions.

This is according to results of a study on drug quality in Papua New Guinean health facilities which was conducted by the Papua New Guinea Institute of Medical Research (IMR), the Central Public Health Laboratory (CPHL), and overseas collaborators.

The study, which was the first country-wide investigation of drug quality, found that 90% of the tested medicines were of good quality, including all samples of the new first line treatment for malaria “Mala-1”, all samples of the antibiotic doxycycline and all except one sample of amoxicillin.

According to Dr Manuel Hetzel, the lead researcher of the study, it is reassuring that the most important malaria treatment provided by the Department of Health is of excellent quality.

The main quality problems were found in samples of another malaria drug, Primaquine, which is used in combination with Mala-1 to treat vivax-malaria.

“Almost 80% of the primaquine tablets tested contained insufficient active ingredient, essentially rendering the drugs useless” Dr Hetzel says.

For this study, researchers from IMR and CPHL collected antimalarial and antibiotic drugs from 60 health facilities and government warehouses (Area Medical Stores) in eighteen provinces of Papua New Guinea.

The chemical content of the drugs was then analysed by collaborators at the University of Western Australia and Curtin University in Perth, Australia.

In this study, poor quality drugs were found in almost 50% of all visited health facilities and across the country.

Previously published smaller studies had also identified poor quality medicines in private pharmacies in Port Moresby.

Together, these studies confirm that poor quality medicines can spread through the health system and reach patients without being detected by authorities.

According to Dr Evelyn Lavu, Manager of CPHL and also an investigator in this study, the results underline the urgent need for an effective drug quality control system in Papua New Guinea.

“We require a working system, adequate facilities and trained staff within PNG to be able to identify poor quality drugs” Dr Lavu says.

The research team also stresses the need for a regulatory framework and Government action to ensure that only quality-assured drugs from certified providers are purchased, poor quality products can be removed from the market before causing harm, and suppliers of such products can be prosecuted.

The researchers also call on private pharmacies to only purchase from reputable manufacturers and not trade quality for a bargain price.

Lastly, patients should refrain from purchasing cheap and potentially dangerous drugs from uncertified sources in the streets or on the market.

ABOUT THE RESEARCH TEAM

The study was conducted by researchers from the Papua New Guinea Institute of Medical Research (PNG IMR), Goroka, the Central Public Health Laboratory (CPHL) of the Department of Health, Port Moresby, the University of Queensland, Brisbane, the University of Western Australia and the Curtin University, Perth, Australia, and the Swiss Tropical and Public Health Institute (Swiss TPH), Basel, Switzerland.

ABOUT POOR QUALITY DRUGS

Poor quality medicines that contain insufficient, too much, or wrong pharmaceutical ingredients are a threat to the safety of patients. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), the use of such products can result in treatment failure and contribute to drug resistance (eg. in the case of antimalarials and antibiotics) or even death of patients.

Poor quality medicines can be a result of deliberate fraudulent activity (so-called counterfeit or falsified drugs), of poor manufacturing practice (so-called substandard drugs), or of degradation, for example due to wrong storage (so-called degraded drugs).

It is difficult to estimate the extent of the problem but reports of poor quality drugs have come from all over the world. A task force led by the WHO states that easy money is one of the main drivers behind producing low quality products. In countries where legislation and law enforcement are weak, such products can easily enter the market and reach patients. Only an effective cooperation among stakeholders (e.g. Health Authorities, Customs, Law Enforcement agencies and medicines providers) can detect and stop the spread of poor quality drugs.

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