

Illicit Drug Sales Fueled By Smartphones And Social Media

According to Britain's drugs watchdog, criminal gangs are harnessing smartphones and social media to send illegal sales of potentially dangerous [slimming tablets](#), sleeping pills, and Viagra soaring.

A combination of smartphones allowing easy access to the internet to people and ease of promotion via social media has allowed suppliers of illegal drugs to target in a more effective way, said the Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulatory Agency (MHRA).

This year, the MHRA has targeted internet operations of gangs for the first time. It has removed 18,671 YouTube videos that were directing viewers to websites illegally selling prescription and counterfeit drugs. Despite this, the MHRA has reported a big rise in black market sales of the banned drugs to people who may have otherwise find it difficult or embarrassing to seek assistance from their doctor. Most patients are hesitant in discussing embarrassing health conditions like obesity or [sexual dysfunction](#) with their family doctor.

The MHRA seized 1.2 million doses of illegally-supplied erectile dysfunction drugs including Viagra, 383,000 slimming products and 331,000 doses of sleeping pills, tranquillisers, and anti-depressants over the course of 2014. Other common drugs sold illegally included hair-loss treatments, cognitive enhancers and [anabolic steroids](#) used by bodybuilders.

It is believed by the World Health Organization that about half of all drugs sold are counterfeits. Many of the treatments are out-of-date or have been contaminated because of storage in unhygienic and appalling conditions.

Alistair Jeffrey, head of enforcement at the drugs watchdog, said smartphones have allowed people greater access to the internet and all of a sudden this accessibility, combined with social media, has made a significant difference in how criminals reach consumers.

Jeffrey, a former detective superintendent who previously ran the Metropolitan Police's child abuse investigation command centre, said this is something we are looking at now in a serious way and remarked there is a phenomenal market out there. He went on to remark that raids organised by the MHRA have found drugs stored in abysmal conditions. Jeffrey added these people are not interested in sanitary conditions, they are in it for the money. He went on to remark that besides the obvious risks of taking medicines made from rat poison and other substitutes used by gangs, there are also dangers in taking medicines without proper consultation.

The head of enforcement at the drugs watchdog also said there are definitely health risks because a patient might have a condition that means they should not take a certain drug. He further said patients who are viewing the footage on YouTube are directed to other websites that purport to be officially-registered pharmacies that sell potentially dangerous and fake medicines.

Bernard Leroy, director of the International Institute of Research Against Counterfeit Medicines in Paris, said we are in a situation where internet usage is growing so fast that we are at risk of losing control. Bernard added this will become a major issue for public health in coming years and also said people are more and more focused on obtaining these medicines and people are going to the internet for them.