

Early Warning Notification

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Europol

Operations Directorate

Vaccine-related crime during the COVID-19 pandemic

Background

Trafficking of pharmaceutical products takes place on a large scale and is highly lucrative for the organised crime groups involved.

The expectation of the development of a viable COVID-19 vaccine has generated global attention¹. While testing is ongoing, several EU Member States have announced that a vaccine will be available soon. Organised crime has reacted swiftly to adapt its methods and product offerings to the COVID-19 pandemic. The expected arrival of a genuine COVID-19 vaccine has already inspired criminal activities and will likely be exacerbated once vaccines become available.

What is happening?

The World Health Organization detected a falsified influenza vaccine in Mexico in October 2020. The fake vaccine had a different batch number and expiry dates than genuine products. The alleged manufacturing pharmaceutical company confirmed that they did not produce or distribute this product².



World Health Organisation 2020, Medical Product Alert N°6/2020 Falsified Fluzone

Why is this relevant?

The detection of a fake influenza vaccine confirms that criminals seize opportunities as soon as they present themselves. Owing to the pandemic, the demand for the influenza vaccine has been higher than usual and there risks being a shortage. Criminals have reacted quickly by producing counterfeit influenza vaccines. The same scenario is also likely to happen when COVID-19 vaccines do become available.

Criminals may attempt to exploit the current global focus on COVID-19 vaccines.

Criminals may spread disinformation about vaccines to defraud individuals and companies. When a COVID-19 vaccine does become available, it will likely not be available for sale online. However, fraudulent pharmaceutical products advertised as allegedly treating or preventing COVID-19 are already on sale, both offline and online³.

¹World Health Organization 2020, Draft landscape of COVID-19 candidate vaccines, accessible at <https://www.who.int/publications/m/item/draft-landscape-of-covid-19-candidate-vaccines>, accessed 29/10/2020.

²World Health Organization 2020, Medical Product Alert N°6/2020 Falsified Fluzone® Quadrivalent Influenza Vaccine identified in WHO region of the Americas, accessible at https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/substandard-and-falsified/n6-2020falsifiedfluzone-en.pdf?sfvrsn=41ec6796_14, accessed 29/10/2020.

³Europol 2020, How COVID-19 related crime infected Europe, accessible at <https://www.europol.europa.eu/publications-documents/how-covid-19-related-crime-infected-europe-during-2020>, accessed 29/10/2020.

Some dark web markets feature advertisements for fake COVID-19 vaccines. The number of offers is limited at this stage but will likely increase once a legitimate vaccine becomes available. Criminals advertise their fake vaccines using the brands of genuine pharmaceutical companies that are already in the final stages of testing⁴.



Dark web advertisement _ Fake COVID-19 vaccine

Once a legitimate vaccine enters the market, counterfeited versions of the specific vaccine brand are expected to circulate rapidly. Similar to the fake influenza vaccine encountered in Mexico, counterfeit COVID-19 vaccines may represent a significant public health threat if they are ineffective at best or toxic at worst, given their production in underground labs without hygiene standards. Fake vaccines may even have a wider-reaching impact if new outbreaks emerge in communities assumed to be vaccinated⁵. Counterfeit vaccines may circulate on illicit markets or be introduced to the legal market, as occurs regularly with other counterfeit pharmaceuticals. The expected high demand for COVID-19 vaccines will likely attract organised crime groups seeking to capitalise on the pandemic situation and subsequent vaccination campaigns. For example, criminals may resort to illegally refilling empty vials. Therefore, procedures for the correct disposal of vials by grinding or incineration will have to be properly enforced⁶.

Finally, when demand exceeds supply, criminals seek to divert pharmaceutical products from the legal market due to the substantial profits on offer. High demand may prompt some people to seek out alternative sources of the vaccine rather than official government-sanctioned vaccination programmes. Genuine COVID-19 vaccines will be highly valuable commodities and their supply chains (storage, transportation and delivery) will be at risk of being targeted by criminals seeking to obtain these pharmaceutical products. Organised crime groups might target transit containing COVID-19 vaccines for hijacking and theft⁷. Transport associations are preparing for the large-scale logistical effort of transporting and distributing the vaccines taking into consideration security risks⁸. Diversion from the legal market may also pose risks to public health, as vaccines found outside the cold chain are not considered safe⁹.

What we would like to know from you?

One aim of this notification is to increase vigilance in EU countries, third-party countries and organisations on the possible involvement of criminals in the vaccine development and distribution process.

Member States are encouraged to share any relevant information on criminal activities related to COVID-19 or flu vaccines with Europol.

⁴Europol information.

⁵European Pharmaceutical Review 2020, COVID-19 vaccine: applying healthcare traceability learnings to ensure safe global distribution, accessible at <https://www.europeanpharmaceuticalreview.com/article/125581/covid-19-vaccine-applying-healthcare-traceability-learnings-to-ensure-safe-global-distribution/>, accessed 14/08/2020.

⁶Europol information.

⁷Transport Asset Protection Association 2020, News release: Pharmaceutical supply chains ready to manage the 'biggest security challenge for a generation' as the world awaits new COVID vaccine, retrieved at https://www.tapa-global.org/fileadmin/public/images/news/PRESS_RELEASES/PRESS_RELEASE_-_Pharmaceutical_supply_chains_ready_to_manage_the_biggest_security_challenge_for_a_generation_as_the_world_awaits_new_Covid_vaccine.pdf, accessed 21/11/2020.

⁸Transport Asset Protection Association 2020, News release: Pharmaceutical supply chains ready to manage the 'biggest security challenge for a generation' as the world awaits new COVID vaccine, retrieved at https://www.tapa-global.org/fileadmin/public/images/news/PRESS_RELEASES/PRESS_RELEASE_-_Pharmaceutical_supply_chains_ready_to_manage_the_biggest_security_challenge_for_a_generation_as_the_world_awaits_new_Covid_vaccine.pdf, accessed 21/11/2020; IATA 2020, Guidance for Vaccine and Pharmaceutical Logistics and Distribution, accessible at <https://www.iata.org/en/programs/cargo/>, accessed 16/11/2020.

⁹Europol information.