The Issue of Substandard Healthcare Products

Delegates,

The circulation of substandard healthcare products has become an increasingly significant global health challenge. Substandard healthcare products are medicines, vaccines, medical devices, and other health-related products that fail to meet quality standards or specifications. Unlike counterfeit products, which are deliberately falsified, substandard products may result from poor manufacturing practices, inadequate regulation, improper storage, or weaknesses in supply chains. Regardless of the cause, these products pose serious risks to public health and can undermine confidence in healthcare systems worldwide.

The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that low and middle-income countries are particularly vulnerable to the distribution of substandard medical products due to limited regulatory capacity, weak monitoring systems, and difficulties enforcing quality standards. However, the issue is not confined to developing nations. Globalised supply chains mean that poor-quality healthcare products can cross borders easily, affecting countries at all levels of development.

One of the most concerning aspects of this problem is its impact on patient safety. Substandard medicines may contain incorrect quantities of active ingredients, harmful contaminants, or ineffective formulations. Patients who receive these products may experience treatment failure, worsening illness, severe side effects, or death. For individuals suffering from serious conditions such as malaria, tuberculosis, HIV/AIDS, or cancer, receiving ineffective medicines can have life-threatening consequences. Furthermore, the use of poor-quality antibiotics contributes to the growing problem of antimicrobial resistance, making infections more difficult and expensive to treat.

The issue became particularly visible during the COVID-19 pandemic. The unprecedented demand for medicines, vaccines, diagnostic tests, and protective equipment exposed weaknesses in global healthcare supply chains. Many countries struggled to verify the quality of products entering their markets, while shortages increased opportunities for poor-quality products to circulate. This demonstrated the importance of international cooperation in maintaining standards for healthcare products during emergencies.

Another challenge lies in the economic consequences of substandard products. Governments and healthcare providers may spend significant resources purchasing products that ultimately fail to provide effective treatment. This can place additional pressure on already limited healthcare budgets. Patients may also lose trust in healthcare providers, pharmaceutical

companies, and government regulators if treatments consistently fail to deliver expected outcomes. Such loss of confidence can reduce vaccination rates, discourage people from seeking medical care, and weaken public health initiatives.

The rise of online pharmacies and international digital marketplaces has added another layer of complexity. Consumers now have unprecedented access to healthcare products from around the world. While this can increase access to treatment, it can also make regulatory oversight more difficult. Many products sold online originate from jurisdictions with limited quality controls, increasing the risk that substandard medicines reach consumers. The international nature of these transactions makes enforcement particularly challenging for national governments.

Existing international frameworks seek to address this issue through cooperation between national regulatory authorities, healthcare providers, pharmaceutical manufacturers, and international organisations such as the WHO. However, significant differences remain between countries regarding manufacturing standards, inspection regimes, reporting systems, and legal enforcement mechanisms. This raises important questions about how the international community can improve cooperation while respecting national sovereignty and promoting access to affordable healthcare.

As healthcare systems become increasingly interconnected, ensuring the quality, safety, and effectiveness of healthcare products is essential to protecting public health. Delegates must consider whether current international regulations are sufficient and what further steps may be necessary to reduce the risks posed by substandard healthcare products while maintaining equitable access to essential medicines and medical technologies.

Points to Consider

1. How can the United Nations support countries with limited regulatory capacity in monitoring healthcare products?
2. Should international standards for pharmaceutical and medical device manufacturing be strengthened?
3. How can governments improve oversight of online pharmacies and digital healthcare marketplaces?
4. What measures can be taken to reduce the circulation of substandard medicines during global emergencies?

5. How can international cooperation be improved to identify and remove poor-quality healthcare products from supply chains?
6. What role should pharmaceutical companies play in ensuring the quality of products distributed globally?
7. How can the international community balance strict quality controls with the need for affordable healthcare products?
8. Should there be stronger penalties for manufacturers that repeatedly fail to meet agreed safety standards?

Further Reading

- https://www.who.int/teams/regulation-prequalification/incidents-and-substandard-falsified-medical-products
- https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/substandard-and-falsified-medical-products
- https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/frontpage/2019/July/the-dangerous-trade-in-falsified-and-substandard-medicines.html
- https://www.cdc.gov/globalhealth/healthprotection/fetp/training_modules/quality-assurance.html
- https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/health
- https://www.unicef.org/supply
- https://www.who.int/health-topics/antimicrobial-resistance
- https://www.interpol.int/Crimes/Illicit-goods/Pharmaceutical-crime