

## One woman's war with fake drugs

By Olenka Frenkiel  
BBC reporter, Bad Medicine

**Counterfeit drugs are flooding the international marketplace, but Nigeria's Dr Dora Akunyili fights day and night to stop it.**

Dora is angry.

Angry because her diabetic sister died from what she is convinced were fake insulin and fake antibiotics.

And angry because so many of her countrymen and women are fighting killer diseases like malaria and tuberculosis with little more than sugar syrup and chalk tablets, cynically packaged to look like the real thing.

When she started her job as director general of Nigeria's National Agency for Drug and Food Administration (Nafdac), she trawled drugs markets, hospitals and clinics and was horrified at what she discovered.

A survey conducted with the World Health Organisation found more than half the drugs on sale in Nigeria were fake or sub-standard.

Nigeria's hospitals were using fake and contaminated drips, surgeons were using fake adrenalin to re-start the heart, anaesthetists were giving sub-strength muscle relaxant to patients in their operating theatres.

"Counterfeit drugs are murder," says Dora. "It is the highest form of terrorism against public health because it kills a mass."

### Death threats

**Counterfeit drugs are murder**  
Dr Dora Akunyili

Until her arrival, Nafdac, like many other government organisations in Nigeria, had functioned little better than a toll gate. Importers simply paid a bribe to get their products into the market.

That changed.

Last year she closed down the vast open-air medicine market in Kano for three months, after her officers confiscated £140,000 worth of fake drugs.

But in a culture steeped in corruption, she has not had an easy ride.

She built a new team of female inspectors and pharmacists (she believes most men are too easily tempted by bribes) and started to prosecute importers of fake drugs.

When the public saw the dragons she was slaying, she may have become Nigeria's uncrowned queen, but the counterfeiters fought back.

They burnt down Nafdac's offices and threatened to kill her and her children.

When she stood firm, they shot her in her car. The bullet grazed her skull but she survived.

### **'Injecting water'**

Direct proof that a fake drug has killed is hard to find.

However, one particular tragedy in July 2003, is probably as close as it gets.

The International Children's Heart Foundation visited Nigeria to operate on sick children at a teaching hospital in Enugu.

The operations should have been straightforward. The patients' prognosis was good. But when the operations began, things went wrong.

Cardiac nurse Joanne Price recalls: "You give them adrenalin to restart the heart and that normally works. But this time nothing came back. It was water. I felt we were basically injecting water instead of adrenalin."

Four children died as their parents watched and prayed.

Despite being confronted with what seemed to be a hospital cover-up, Dora confiscated supplies and found fake adrenalin, fake muscle relaxant and infected intravenous drips.

The hospital maintain there is no proof to link the deaths of the patients with the drugs used.

### **International effort**

But the problem of fake drugs is not confined to Nigeria, or even the developing world.

In the UK in November 2004, Allan Valentine was imprisoned for manufacturing fake Diazepam and Viagra in his Wembley warehouse where Indian tablet presses and chemicals were found.

In the US, where patented drugs are the most expensive in the world, fakes have penetrated the pharmaceutical chain from drug manufacturers, through wholesalers, to high street pharmacies.

The American Food and Drugs Administration prosecutions have tripled in the last year.

At a conference in Paris about counterfeit medicines, Dora demands concerted global action. "Eradication of counterfeit drugs should be treated as an international health emergency," she says.

She believes that raising public awareness has produced dramatic results in Nigeria and urges other nations to be more open.

Unsurprisingly, drug companies around the world are fearful that their brand will be shunned if news of a fake gets out.

But no matter how tough the situation gets for pharmaceutical industry, Dora will not be leaving any stone unturned.

**Bad Medicine was broadcast on Tuesday 12 July 2005 at 2100 BST on BBC Two.**

Story from BBC NEWS:

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# Problem of Fake Drugs in Nigeria

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Ka (m)



**Problem of Fake Drugs in Nigeria**

« on: July 12, 2005, 10:50 PM »

### ***Review of TV Programme on Dora Akunyili***

I've just finished watching a programme on BBC titled 'Bad Medicine' which essentially was a documentary on how Dora Akunyili, NAFDAC director, was tackling the problem of fake drugs in Nigeria.

The programme started by showing Akunyili addressing the traders at Kano market where she had come to make an address. She explained why their market had been shut down previously, and she exhorted them to avoid peddling fake drugs.

The programme told about how tough things were when Akunyili assumed the headship of NAFDAC four years ago. Her first action was a massive public enlightenment campaign on the dangers of fake drugs and how to recognise fake from real drugs. But when she started getting tough on fake drug traders by seizing their goods, they struck back by burning down NAFDAC labs and buildings.

The programme showed Akunyili showing the reporter on the programme the burnt the NAFDAC headquarters. It also talked about how Akunyili narrowly avoided being assassinated two years ago.

The reporter asked her why she was so passionate about stamping out fake drugs, and she said that her motivation was her late sister who died many years ago from using fake drugs.

The programme then showed the reporter on patrol with NAFDAC officials, and showed them confiscating fake drugs from petty traders. Apparently, most of the traders weren't even aware that their drugs were fake. They showed an incident where one man was arrested because fake drugs were found in his warehouse. The man claimed that he had been planning to hand the drugs into NAFDAC. Then he got all dramatic and started crying and throwing himself on the mercy of the NAFDAC official who was interviewing him.

The programme went on to talk about one big man (I've forgotten the name now) who NAFDAC caught who seemed to be at the top of the chain (and who may have had a hand in her assassination attempt). The man was given the choice either to apologise on public TV and renounce his evil ways or face court action. The man chose the TV option, but later on rejected his TV statement, so the case is now in court.

Then the programme spoke about an incident at UNTH where foreign medical professionals from an international charity visited Nigeria to perform operations on some children. In the course of performing the operations, they realised that the drugs were not having the desired effect and they believed that they might be fake, so they had to suspend the operations and turn away other patients rather than (as they said) risk lives. As a result, some children died.

However, the hospital never informed the parents of the children what happened - the only way the story blew up was when the foreign medical professionals published what they knew, and NAFDAC went into action and tested the medicines at the hospital. All/most were fake. NAFDAC traced the origin of the drugs to Onitsha market. But nobody was sacked, and the head of UNTH and the Minister of Health absolved themselves of any direct responsibility.

The programme noted that a lot of the fake drugs in Nigeria originate from India. Akunvili said that NAFDAC ran a programme where they

**omon** (m)**Re: Problem of Fake Drugs in Nigeria**

« #1 on: July 12, 2005, 11:21 PM »

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I am sad that all the Indians could export to our country are fake and counterfeit drugs and they even brag about it! The callousness with which they make these drugs even when they know it means death for another. I am angry at the greedy Nigerian that would go and buy such drugs.

We need men and women in the calibre of Dora to deliver us from the hands of the money crazy people so that our society will be the one we are proud of.

**Ra** (f)**Re: Problem of Fake Drugs in Nigeria**

« #2 on: July 13, 2005, 12:10 AM »

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@Ka, I saw the same programme and my goodness, I was positively livid.

I was particularly livid at the heartless people who would pour water in drips and sell to terribly sick people, pushing them to their untimely graves. I could have shot the Indian woman who boasted of how she cuts pieces of chalk to represent Panadol and the Indian man who boasted of his large factory of fake drugs.

I was moved to tears when the couple who lost their 18 month old baby to fake drugs were interviewed. American surgeons went to Nigeria to operate on children for free but everything conceivable went wrong after the operations, the kids died, owing to fake drugs. The heart of man is indeed hopelessly wicked.

I commend Dr. Dora and I wish her and her administration every success. There is a woman with a genuine passion for her calling. What paradise on earth Nigeria would be if half the Ministers and people occupying senatorial positions possessed half as much the passion she does towards their diverse jobs.

**obong** (m)**Re: Problem of Fake Drugs in Nigeria**

« #3 on: July 13, 2005, 03:33 PM »

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Our leaders need to get serious and stop misbehaving like this. That's the only way the Indians can continue this rubbish. If not for this lady, many more people would be dying. I wish the media would focus more on the evil these Indian governments do

**Greatpeter**  
(m)**Re: Problem of Fake Drugs in Nigeria**

« #4 on: July 14, 2005, 09:37 PM »

Fake drug is a big problem in Nigeria and we are in for it.

This woman has done a good job little wonder they want her dead at all cost.

And this same woman will be retiring after this tenure who will continue where she stopped.

Fake drugs is the bane of majority who have gone to grave beyond untimely.



Seun (m)



**Re: Problem of Fake Drugs in Nigeria**

« #5 on: February 22, 2006, 11:28 AM »

Dora Akinyuli is fighting a strong fight, but I need what we need is to have drug testing centers al over the country so if your drug isn't working as expected you can get it tested. There's room for a pharmacuetical store chain that guarantees that all drugs sold will be authentic (by buying from manufacturers).



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