Public Campaign Warns Citizens of Dangers of Counterfeit Medicines in Cambodia and Greater Mekong Subregion

USAID, USP Screen Public Service Announcements, Documentary to Raise Awareness of Serious Public Health Threat in Developing Countries

Phnom Penh, Cambodia (Vocus) October 9, 2009 -- As part of a large-scale effort to combat the dire public health consequences of counterfeit medicines on citizens in developing countries, a public service announcement (PSA) campaign is being launched in Cambodia this week by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and the United States Pharmacopeial (USP) Convention--with the cooperation and support of authorities in Cambodia. The PSAs are being broadcast nationally on Cambodian television and throughout Southeast Asia, where the proliferation of substandard and counterfeit medicines intended to treat HIV/AIDS, malaria, tuberculosis and other life-threatening conditions remains a major threat to the lives and livelihood of citizens struggling with these diseases.

Translated into five languages, the "Pharmacide" PSAs are being screened at an October 8th ceremony in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, by Flynn Fuller, USAID Cambodia Mission director; Patrick Lukulay, Ph.D., director of USP's Drug Quality and Information (DQI) Program, which is supported by USAID; and Mark Hammond of Living Films, who directed the PSAs as well as a short documentary that is also being screened. The PSA campaign is an activity of the DQI Program. Implemented by USP, a nonprofit scientific organization that develops globally recognized standards for the quality of medicines, the DQI Program advances strategies to improve the quality of medicines on four continents. A key function of the program is rooting out substandard and counterfeit medicines, which the World Health Organization estimates account for between 10 and 30 percent of all medicines in the developing world.

"Counterfeit and substandard medicines pose a grave threat to patients in Southeast Asia, but their presence in these countries remains a largely unknown problem," said Mr. Fuller. "These poor-quality medicines can contribute to adverse reactions in patients, including protracted illness and death, but may go undetected as severe symptoms and death may be wrongly attributed to the course of their disease. This is a fate that no one deserves. It is a problem that USAID, USP and national authorities take very seriously, and we hope to reach patients directly through this PSA campaign."

"Though they may look similar or almost identical to the intended medicine, counterfeit drugs may contain little or no active ingredient," added Dr. Lukulay. "It can be very difficult for patients to discern any difference, often requiring complex testing to determine the authenticity of a medicine. However, the difference can truly be life and death, which is why it is so essential for citizens to purchase medicines from a licensed pharmacy. The PSAs underscore the consequences of purchasing these drugs through alternative means, which is unfortunately an attractive option among an economically deprived population because of the lower cost. We hope that once citizens are made aware of the consequences, they will not look at this as a viable alternative."

Further compounding the problem, Lukulay added, "not only do substandard drugs affect the individual taking them, but those that contain some but not all of an active ingredient can contribute to the development of drug-resistant strains of these diseases. This is a serious public health threat in developing countries, impacting not only the individual patient but the greater population of citizens, all of whom may suffer when a medicine is no longer effective because resistance has developed."
The PSAs show the life cycle of a counterfeit drug--from the counterfeiter to the dealer to the victim. It notes that "counterfeiting is a crime against humanity, against you," and urges citizens to always use a licensed pharmacy when purchasing medicines.

Through the DQI Program, USP advances the quality of medicines via a variety of activities that include implementing active surveillance programs in which medicines are taken off the market and tested; establishing "sentinel sites" within countries to perform testing; and training local chemists working in government laboratories, medical students and other qualified parties to conduct such testing in a cost-effective manner.

To view the PSA and video from the event, visit www.youtube.com/uspharmacopeia. For more information, please visit www.usp.org or email mediarelations (at) usp (dot) org.

USP--Advancing Public Health Since 1820
The United States Pharmacopeial (USP) Convention is a scientific, nonprofit, standards-setting organization that advances public health through public standards and related programs that help ensure the quality, safety, and benefit of medicines and foods. USP's standards are recognized and used worldwide. For more information about USP visit http://www.usp.org.

###
Contact Information
Francine Pierson
U.S. Pharmacopeia
http://www.usp.org/worldwide
301-816-8588

Online Web 2.0 Version
You can read the online version of this press release here.