

## 'Fake food' epidemic in South Africa: A growing food safety/public health issue?

**To the Editor:** Food fraud claims are increasing, especially in developing and underdeveloped countries. 'Fake food' is also known as counterfeit food.<sup>[1]</sup> It is food produced using non-foodstuff substances, or in some instances, food manufactured and sold under a different company's name or brand.<sup>[2]</sup> The financial losses to fake food are estimated to be USD30 - 40 billion per year.<sup>[3]</sup> Consumers and producers bear most of this cost. The health impacts of fake food can range from acute to chronic, depending on the degree of exposure to contaminated/tainted foodstuffs.<sup>[4]</sup> Communities that are especially vulnerable to these impacts are those in developing countries, or poor communities.<sup>[5]</sup> According to anecdotal evidence, three 14-year-old Nigerian pupils from the same school died after consuming fake food.<sup>[6]</sup> There is a dearth of scientific information on the magnitude of the problem, and the health impacts of fake food and its consumption. This letter seeks to highlight the need to investigate the impact of fake food, and to alert the respective stakeholders of the need to act before it is too late.

In recent times, there has been growing social media attention focused on fake food sold by informal traders, in what are known in townships as spaza shops.<sup>[2]</sup> South Africa (SA) has experienced a pandemic of fake food claims on social and news media platforms. Recently, in the Northern Cape Province, communities decided to remove foodstuffs that they claimed were fake, and those on the shelves that were past their expiry date. The Environmental Health Services department, in the meantime, has reacted to social media calls by conducting blitz inspections in which non-compliant foodstuffs were confiscated and destroyed.<sup>[2]</sup>

It appears that there is no official approach to addressing this growing issue in communities in SA and other developing/underdeveloped countries. While the economic impact caused by the production and sale of fake foods is known, information on the health impact of their consumption, especially among vulnerable groups, is non-existent. The concern is that counterfeit products are commonly produced using banned or substandard substances or materials.<sup>[7]</sup> They may contain ingredients that are detrimental to

human health. Does the paucity of scientific information available imply that fake foods are not a food safety/public health concern?

We recommend that those responsible for food safety in the country, in particular the Environmental Health Services department, which is responsible for ensuring that food sold to the community is safe and wholesome, urgently develop strategies, programmes and policies to address this growing epidemic. Most importantly, educational and monitoring programmes are needed to protect vulnerable communities. Furthermore, there are research gaps that exist in identifying the impact of fake food on public health.

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