



© 2010 Nature America, Inc. All rights reserved.

## Straight talk with... Aline Plançon

Counterfeiting medicine has become such a sophisticated crime that it has attracted the attention of the world's largest police organization, Interpol. In November, these top cops wrapped up an operation in South East Asia, in which they helped seize around 20 million counterfeit drugs and arrested more than 30 people. To further stem the tide of phoney, dangerous, unregistered and illegal medical products, Interpol has placed French police officer Aline Plançon at the helm of its dedicated Medical Products Counterfeiting and Pharmaceutical Crime (MPCPC) unit, which was created in January. Working closely with the World Health Organization's (WHO's) International Medical Products Anti-Counterfeiting Taskforce (IMPACT)—a four-year-old inter-agency partnership developing global, collaborative anticounterfeiting solutions—Plançon is tasked with supporting and coordinating enforcement activities around the world.

Asher Mullard spoke with Plançon about her role in combating a deadly international scourge.

### What is Interpol's role in anticounterfeiting missions?

We are here to bring together police officers, customs agents, regulatory authorities, pharmaceutical companies and ministry of health inspectors from different countries and regions and to develop enforcement activities with them. We get all these groups to sit down together and discuss what information we've all got, where our priorities lie, where illicit goods are entering a country and what potential problems we might face. We then collectively plan raids, scientific surveys, police investigations, surveillance and customs interventions.

### What types of fakes do you find?

The variety of counterfeit drugs is as huge as the Earth. We've caught injectables, medical devices, sugar pills, counterfeits with a little bit of active ingredient and others with active ingredients that should not be there.

### How do you rate IMPACT's and Interpol's success to date?

In terms of monetary values, it's difficult to tell. However, we have seen some countries that, after an operation, create their own national task forces to prevent counterfeit medical products. For me, this is the best success we can have, as it shows we've raised awareness and made governments understand that this crime is sophisticated and is killing people.

### Counterfeit drugs are now big business—worth \$75 billion, according to the industry-backed think tank Center for Medicine in the Public Interest. Given the enormity of the problem, what motivates you to continue?

Criminals have no problems manufacturing or distributing counterfeit medical products that are going to kill people. The fakes they make are silent killers. Patients who are fragile don't even know they are taking dangerous drugs, and people are dying. That is what motivates me the most.

### What does the MPCPC unit need to make an even bigger impact?

We are two people—myself and a criminal analyst who analyzes information, checks databases and follows up on cases. We have many countries knocking at our door, but, unfortunately, we cannot deal with all of their requests. Ideally, we would be six or seven people at headquarters with another 13 or 14 specialized officers around the world developing regional projects. I'd like to have people with mixed backgrounds: a scientist, a health community expert and somebody from communications to reflect the complexity of the crime.

### What kind of relationship do you have with the scientific community?

The first anticounterfeiting investigation I worked on, before IMPACT had been formed, was initiated by scientists who found fake drugs. They alerted the WHO, who contacted Interpol. Since then, we've developed strong relationships with scientists. The scientific community is doing a lot and is trying its best to develop in a field that it was not particularly involved in just three years ago. They are waking up, but they need to get even more involved.

### How about with the pharmaceutical industry?

The pharmaceutical industry provides expertise, man power, support with product identification and help with training as well. They do not provide monetary support, but their help is very important. Also, pharmaceutical companies have got their own security services that collaborate through the Pharmaceutical Security Institute. We try to exchange information on critical cases as much as possible.

### Consumer advocacy groups have argued that the pharmaceutical industry is pushing anticounterfeiters to defend intellectual property rights (IPR) instead of focusing solely on public health violations, with negative consequences for the generics industry. Does this debate affect what you do?

Previously, my anticounterfeiting work was carried out as part of Interpol's IPR unit, which was problematic. People who wanted to challenge us would say that this was a means of supporting private sector companies, which was absolutely not the case. With our new unit, we show the community that we understand the challenges and complexity of the problem and that it's just the health of people we are concerned with—people are dying. But you have to realize that when we go out into the field, because there is not enough legislation in place to combat fake medicines, we have to use the existing tools. The infringement of IPR is one of the legal actions that we can use—people should not ignore that.