

In the line of fire

Dora Akunyili has spent the past four years facing down corruption and tackling Nigeria's rampant problems with fake drugs. This crusade has been phenomenally successful, but has placed Akunyili's life in danger. Peter Aldhous caught up with her on a recent trip to the United States.

Q&A

How did you come to your job of regulating Nigeria's drug supply?

I got sick, and was given £12,000 (US\$23,000) by my employers for surgery in London. When I got there, it was diagnosed as irritable bowel syndrome, and I didn't need the surgery. So I returned the money. People said: "What type of woman is this? This is rare." Later, Nigeria's President Olusegun Obasanjo heard about this, and asked me about NAFDAC, the National Agency for Food and Drug Administration and Control. I said: "There is no system that cannot be corrected, if there is someone who is determined." After that, he gave me the job of director-general.

Did you have any personal experience with counterfeit drugs?

In Nigeria, there is hardly any family that does not have a history of somebody dying of fake drugs. My youngest sister died of diabetes in 1988. I'm a pharmacologist. I know it was fake insulin.

How bad were things when you took on your post?

I did not know the enormity of the problem until I came on board in April 2001. There was a total failure of the regulatory process. Fake and substandard drugs flooded Nigeria. Multinational drug companies divested and left. Our local drug manufacturers were closing up shop. How could they compete with somebody who is compressing chalk to make tablets, or adding olive oil into capsules and calling it multivitamins? People who had money went abroad for treatment. But the poor people were at the mercy of these criminals.

What did you do to tackle these problems?

We started with public enlightenment. Every two weeks, we publish the differences

between fake and genuine drugs in Nigerian newspapers. We also use the radio.

Most of the fake drugs in Nigeria come from India and China. In these countries, we established independent analysts to test drugs and give certification papers. Then we beefed up surveillance at all ports of entry into Nigeria. Now, if an aircraft arrives and we find fake drugs, it is grounded.

We have also devised systematic surveillance of markets and shops. We closed Aba market, in the southeast, for six months in 2003 for selling large quantities of unregistered, fake and substandard drugs. It's a serious thing to close a market. They apologized on radio and TV. Now they are fighting among themselves to keep it clean — if anybody makes NAFDAC close this market again, that person would be killed.

How many lives have been saved through your work?

Many deaths are not reported in Nigeria, and our people, culturally, are not into autopsy. But it must be millions. In 2004, we found that the incidence of unregistered drugs had fallen by 80% over two years.

How have the criminals responded?

They fought back! They put fetish objects in my offices. They put blood on feathers. I guess they were doing that to intimidate me. Then they started phone calls. They called my husband and warned: "Your family can easily be wiped out." My son, who was in high school in Benin, was clever enough to tell the students that I was not his mother. But that really pained me.

In August 2002, they went to our lab in Lagos and totally vandalized everything. I don't know what they used — maybe iron bars. The policeman on duty, they cut him to

“One of the drug barons arranged to assassinate me”



Before being brought in to head the National Agency for Food and Drug Administration and Control in April 2001, Dora Akunyili was a pharmacologist at the University of Nigeria Nsukka. In the 1990s, she worked for the Petroleum Special Trust Fund, which distributed government oil revenues for infrastructure projects.

pieces with machetes. In March 2004, they set our headquarters ablaze and, a few days later, they burnt down our labs in Kaduna.

One of the big barons arranged to assassinate me in my hometown in December 2003, as we were driving through. At first, I thought the sound was some Christmas fireworks, until our back windscreen shattered. A bullet went through my scarf, grazed my scalp, and went out through the front windscreen. I was crying, and the policeman in front of my car was on a walkie-talkie, telling my driver to keep going. A bus driver who was trying to block the shooters had his bus riddled with bullets. The man died on the spot.

Are you tempted to resign?

If I leave, it means that these criminals have triumphed. This, coupled with the trust that the president has in me, makes me feel that I have to struggle to the end. I'll be five years in the job in April 2006. By the grace of God, if I'm still alive, I will not go for renewal.

Will someone continue your work?

I really pray, and I'm also training some people. But this is a political position. My candidate may or may not be accepted. ■

Peter Aldhous is *Nature's* chief news & features editor.