

POLICING THE USA

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As illegal drug trade goes from the corner to the web, rising deadly threat of fake pills

Just 2 milligrams of fentanyl can kill. Fake pills are created to look like the real thing, killing more Americans, including teens and young adults.

Anne Milgram Opinion contributor

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Ed and Mary Ternan lived a parent's worst nightmare. On May 14, 2020, they lost their son Charlie Ternan, 22, after he took a deadly dose of fentanyl. Purchased online, that one pill – which Charlie thought was Percocet – is all it took to end their son's young life and permanently change theirs. The Ternans' story is, unfortunately, all too familiar for so many.

When I was nominated by President Joe Biden in April to lead the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration, I was instantly struck by the messages I received from people who lost a loved one to an overdose. The image is haunting, and tragically common: a family member, a friend, a classmate, a co-worker, taking a pill they believed was safe.

More than 93,000 Americans died from a drug overdose last year, according to data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention that was released in July. That number is nearly 30% higher than the year before. Our nation's overdose crisis is fueled by deadly fentanyl – a synthetic opioid that is lethal in doses of just 2 milligrams.

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And now, a new era of illegal drugs is threatening our nation: deadly, fake pills. Criminal drug networks are shipping chemicals from China to Mexico, where they are

converted to dangerous substances like fentanyl and methamphetamine and then pressed into pills. The end result – deadly, fake pills – are what these criminal drug networks make and market to prey on Americans for profit.

The only safe medications are the ones prescribed by a trusted medical professional and dispensed by a licensed pharmacist. Any pills that do not meet this standard are unsafe and potentially deadly.

The dramatic increase in the availability and lethality of counterfeit pills led DEA to issue its first Public Safety Alert in six years to warn the public of this danger. These counterfeit pills look just like the real thing: same color, same size, same markings. Drug traffickers are tricking Americans into thinking they are buying real prescription opioids such as OxyContin, Percocet, Vicodin and Xanax; or stimulants such as Adderall. Drug traffickers are also exploiting our nation's overdose crisis by making it easier for people to purchase these fake pills, offering them widely, accessibly and cheaply.

In two months, the DEA and law enforcement seized more than 1.8 million fake pills that included fentanyl. Today, DEA lab testing reveals that about 4 out of every 10 of these fentanyl-laced pills are potentially deadly.

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What's worse, the market for these deadly, fake pills has moved from the street corner to social media and e-commerce platforms, where cartels and drug traffickers target teenagers and young adults who are especially vulnerable to this new online risk. Today, the drug trade (which garners more than \$400 billion a year) is with us wherever our smartphones are: in our homes, our schools and everywhere in between.

The simple fact is, any pill obtained outside of a licensed pharmacy could very well contain fentanyl, and the amount is increasingly deadly. Or the pill could contain meth. Teens who curiously order a pill on a smartphone; college students who

take a pill from a friend; elderly neighbors searching online for a pain killer – these unsuspecting Americans are dying as victims of predatory criminal drug networks.

We must work together to turn the tide against the opioid epidemic and against the deadly, fake pills plaguing the United States. This threat is real, it's pervasive and it's tragically driving overdose death rates nationwide. Talk with your family members, friends, colleagues and neighbors about the dangers of fake pills. Always be vigilant about medication, and only take medications prescribed to you by a medical professional and dispensed by a licensed pharmacist.

These small steps will help save lives by preventing further, tragic overdose deaths.

Anne Milgram is the administrator of the Drug Enforcement Administration, which recently launched the "One pill can kill" campaign.