

FDA NEWS RELEASE

For Immediate Release: Dec. 29, 2009

Media Inquiries: Tom Gasparoli, 301-796-4737, thomas.gasparoli@fda.hhs.gov

Consumer Inquiries: 888-INFO-FDA

FDA Warns Public of Continued Extortion Scam by FDA Impersonators

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration is warning the public about criminals posing as FDA special agents and other law enforcement personnel as part of an international extortion scam.

The criminals call the victims -- who in most cases previously purchased drugs over the Internet or via "telepharmacies" -- and identify themselves as FDA special agents or other law enforcement officials. The criminals inform the victims that purchasing drugs over the Internet or the telephone is illegal, and that law enforcement action will be pursued unless a fine or fee ranging from \$100 to \$250,000 is paid. Victims often also have fraudulent transactions placed against their credit cards.

The criminals always request the money be sent by wire transfer to a designated location, usually in the Dominican Republic. If victims refuse to send money, they are often threatened with a search of their property, arrest, deportation, physical harm, and or incarceration.

"Impersonating an FDA official is a violation of federal law," said Michael Chappell, the FDA's acting associate commissioner for regulatory affairs. "The public should note that no FDA official will ever contact a consumer by phone demanding money or any other form of payment."

FDA special agents and other law enforcement officials are not authorized to impose or collect criminal fines. Only a court can take such action, with fines payable to the U.S. Treasury.

Anyone receiving a telephone call from a person purporting to be an FDA or other law enforcement official who is seeking money to settle a law enforcement action for the illegal purchase of drugs over the Internet should refuse the demand and call the FDA's Office of Criminal Investigations Metro Washington Field Office at (800) 521-5783 to report the crime.

In addition to posing as FDA officials, criminals have posed as special agents of the DEA, FBI, U.S. Secret Service, U.S. Customs Service, as well as U.S. and Dominican prosecutors and judges. In response, the FDA, in conjunction with various federal, state, and local agencies, is actively pursuing criminal charges.

The FDA also reminds consumers to use caution when purchasing prescription drugs over the telephone or the Internet. In addition to the increased risk of purchasing unsafe and ineffective drugs from Web sites operating outside the law, there is the danger that personal data can be compromised. For more on FDA's concerns about unlawful drug sales on the Internet, see <http://www.fda.gov/ForConsumers/ProtectYourself/default.htm>.