



James Martin Center for Nonproliferation Studies

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Security: Fake Botox, Real Threat
USE OF COUNTERFEIT BOTOX GROWING WORLDWIDE
Illicit laboratories in China may pose security threats

James Martin Center for Nonproliferation Studies scholars analyze these troubling developments in the June 2010 issue of *Scientific American*

Botulin neurotoxin (BoNT), a lethal poison, is normally closely guarded as a potential biological weapons agent. Writing in this month's *Scientific American*, Ken Coleman and Raymond Zilinskas explain why procuring BoNT has recently become much easier, as a result of a booming market for counterfeit versions of the beauty product Botox.

The fake cosmetic products generally contain real toxin, albeit in widely varying amounts. Tiny vials of bogus Botox could do little harm as terrorist weapons, but they do point to a growing number of illegal producers of BoNT who are a serious threat. Nothing prevents those illicit manufacturers from making and selling the toxin directly to terrorist organizations or stops terrorists from getting into the counterfeiting business themselves for profit and access to toxin.

BoNT is relatively easy to manufacture and a single molecule is believed potent enough to incapacitate a single nerve cell. Thanks to the Internet, consumers are driving the demand for counterfeits and anonymous Web-based suppliers of BoNT products could become portals for direct sales of pure toxin.

The authors advocate for a scientific approach to solving this modern problem. Collaborations between governments, law-enforcement agencies and legitimate pharmaceutical manufacturers to conduct detailed laboratory analyses of the counterfeits could begin to establish how many illegal producers are operating and provide evidence for future crackdowns to stem this potential threat.

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