

Faulty vaccines spark public outrage in China

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A scandal involving faulty vaccines in China has caused widespread public anger against both the government and major corporations. The revelations last month demonstrate the systematic neglect of proper standards for production and safety testing, along with cover-ups by the pharmaceutical company, Changchun Changsheng Biotechnology.

The scandal initially broke on July 15 when China's Food and Drug Administration (CFDA) announced that Changsheng had forged data while improperly producing and storing approximately 113,000 rabies vaccines. This was done to cut costs, according to a government investigation team.

Five days later, the CFDA also revealed that it had been investigating the company since last November for selling 250,000 ineffective doses of the DPT vaccine, a combined vaccine for diphtheria, pertussis (whooping cough), and tetanus. Despite evidence of criminal negligence, the CFDA allowed Changsheng to continue its operations, only revoking its "good manufacturing practices" (GMP) licence in response to the rabies vaccine scandal.

While "vaccine" quickly became the most censored word in China, this did not prevent an enormous number of critical comments and postings on social media sites like Weibo and WeChat. The social media hashtag, #Changsheng vaccine case, received over 470 million views within a week, with many stating that the exposure had undermined their trust in the authorities.

In comments typical of the responses, one Weibo user asked, "If the state does not protect its citizens, how can we love our country?" Another said, "All my friends are freaking out with this vaccine case, everyone is scared. It really reflects big loopholes and issues with China's food and drug safety regulation."

Yanzhong Huang, an adjunct senior fellow for global health at the Council on Foreign Relations, stated in the *Washington Post*, "The incident, if not properly

handled... could evolve into a legitimacy crisis. The environment, corruption, food safety, and now vaccines. These things add up and they can really pose challenges to government legitimacy."

As with previous incidents involving public safety, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has addressed the public outrage with a combination of palliative measures, empty rhetoric and censorship. Both Chinese President Xi Jinping and Premier Li Keqiang have weighed in on the issue, denouncing it as "crossing a moral line" and promising severe punishment. Gao Jungfang, the billionaire chairwoman of Changsheng, and 17 other senior officials have been arrested.

Any punishment, however, will likely be a slap on the wrist. The provincial branch of the CFDA in Jilin, where Changsheng is based, has already fined the company a paltry 3.4 million yuan (\$502,200). The company's 2017 profits were 566 million yuan (\$83 million), an increase of nearly 32 percent over 2016, while it was also receiving a 48.3 million yuan (\$7.1 million) government subsidy.

The impact on the estimated 200,000 people administered the faulty DPT vaccines, mostly children, is not yet known. Effects could range from being completely ineffective, putting the children at risk of contracting dangerous diseases, to causing side-effects and reactions, particularly if the vaccines themselves became contaminated with bacteria or other substances.

Changsheng was the second-largest producer of the rabies vaccine in China, manufacturing a quarter of the country's doses. Rabies is a significant public health concern in China, which has the second highest reported rate of the disease in the world and over 2,000 deaths annually. Although its prevalence in developed nations has been almost eliminated, rural and impoverished regions of the world continue to be affected. Almost 60,000 die from the disease every year worldwide.

The potential risks have understandably caused immense hardship and fear among much of the Chinese public. Many families have travelled to Hong Kong, which has a separate healthcare system, to receive medical care for themselves or their children, a difficult and expensive process that is not feasible for many millions of China's working-class and rural families.

On Monday and Tuesday last week, dozens of parents and activists gathered outside buildings in Beijing in a public demonstration against the government. Protests were also held in Chongqing, in south-western China, and a group of parents confronted local health authorities in Weihai, an eastern port city in Shandong province.

"I thought about all the people involved, from the vaccine company to the regulators. They cannot be called human. They are devils in hell," a Weihai mother, whose infant son had received the vaccine, told the *Guardian* newspaper.

While Chinese government officials have sought to portray these crimes as a result of malfeasance by just one company, the scandal is just the latest in a series of similar episodes in the industry.

In November 2017, when Changsheng was being investigated for its dubious DPT vaccines, another pharmaceutical company, the Wuhan Institute of Biological Products, was caught having sold over 400,000 faulty DPT vaccines. Both the company and regulatory authorities have since claimed that this negligence was "an accident" and that problems with its manufacturing process had been resolved, a finding unlikely to reassure anyone.

Last month China's pharmaceutical corporations confronted an international crisis when the widely-used blood pressure medication Valsartan was recalled in 23 countries due to the presence of a carcinogen (cancer-causing substance) in one of its active ingredients. That ingredient was supplied by Zhejiang Huahai Pharmaceuticals.

Many in China have also pointed to the contamination of milk formula with melamine (an industrial chemical used to make plastics) in 2008 that led to the deaths of six infants and caused over 300,000 children to fall ill. Eight years later in 2016, the same milk manufacturers were caught attempting to sell expired or counterfeit milk powder, which increased the risk of exposure to contaminated products or bacteria.

Ultimately, the problem is not limited to China or Chinese companies, but stems from the subordination of all aspects of healthcare to the capitalist system. Major corporations around the world are engaged in similar criminality, with the complicity of their respective national regulatory agencies. The opioid crisis in the United States, exacerbated by pharmaceutical companies illegally distributing large amounts of addictive painkillers to impoverished parts of the country, is but one example.

The author recommends:

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[24 September 2008]



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