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RHODE ISLAND SENIOR BEAT

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U. S. FOOD AND DRUG ADMINISTRATION WARNS OF IMPERSONATOR SCAM

CRANSTON---It's almost time for this year's Super Bowl football championship, so the beginning of the 2011 fraud, scam and scheme season can't be far behind. In fact, the con artists and fraudsters have already kicked off their season. Maureen Patterson of the Senior Medicare Patrol program headquarters in Iowa files this report:

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 a continuing international extortion scam.

The criminals contact their 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 scammers 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 up to several thousands dollars is paid. In some cases, victims 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 and seizure of their property, arrest by law enforcement officials, physical harm or jail time.

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"Impersonating an FDA official is a violation of federal law," said Dara Corrigan, the FDA's associate commissioner for regulatory affairs. "FDA special agents and other law enforcement officials are not authorized to impose or collect criminal fines. Only a court can take such action."

In most instances, victims of extortion-related calls have also received telephone solicitations for additional pharmaceutical purchases from other possibly related, illegal entities located overseas. The extortionists use customer lists complete with extensive personal information provided through previous purchase transactions. These include names, addresses, telephone numbers, Social Security numbers, dates of birth, purchase histories and credit card account numbers.

Typically, these criminals use telephone numbers that change constantly and make it appear as though their calls originate in the United States. No known victim has been approached in person by a law enforcement impersonator associated with this scheme. The FDA's Office of Criminal Investigations, with the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration, and the U.S. Immigrations and Customs Enforcement, Homeland Security Investigations, with the support of various U.S. Attorneys, are pursuing multiple national and international criminal investigations. Arrests have been made and additional prosecutions are pending; however, the scheme is likely to continue. The FDA has issued similar warnings in the past.

Victims of this scheme who have suffered monetary loss through the payment of funds in response to an extortion call, or 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, may obtain a victim questionnaire by contacting the FDA's Office of Criminal Investigations at www.fda.gov/OCI and clicking "Report Suspected Criminal Activity."

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The FDA also reminds consumers that pharmaceutical products offered online and by telephone by sources of unknown origin can pose a substantial health risk. Products recovered during this investigation that were purchased from online or telephone sources have been found to contain trace amounts of heroin, other undisclosed and potentially harmful active pharmaceutical ingredients, or no active ingredient at all. Purchases should only be made from licensed pharmacies located in the United States. In addition to the increased risk of purchasing unsafe and ineffective drugs from websites operating outside the law, personal data may be compromised.

EDITOR'S NOTE: If Medicare beneficiaries are contacted by someone who appears to be in on this scam, they can call 1-800-MEDICARE (1-800-633-4227). The TTY number is 1-800-325-0778 and their local police department. Beneficiaries can also contact FDA at 1-888-INFO-FDA (1-888-463-6332). The SMP initiative teaches Medicare beneficiaries to recognize and report fraud, waste and abuse. For more information on SMP, call THE POINT, Rhode Island's Aging and Disability Resource Center, at 401-462-4444. The TTY number is 401-462-4445. Their web site is www.ThePointRI.org.

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The Department of Elderly Affairs was established as a cabinet-level position in 1977 under Rhode Island General Law 42-66-1. DEA is responsible for the development and implementation of a comprehensive system of programs and services for Rhode Islanders ages 60 and older and for adults with disabilities. DEA is also the state's single planning and service Area Agency on Aging under the provisions of the Older Americans Act of 1965.