

Viral post inflames public anger in China vaccine scandal

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China's newest product safety scare burst onto the public consciousness when an obscure essay alleging corruption in the pharmaceutical industry become an internet sensation, exposing widespread anger and distrust after a string of scandals.

The furore over alleged shady dealings by a major [vaccine](#) producer has shattered already fragile trust in regulators and illustrated the rising frustrations of China's increasingly sophisticated consumers.

News that pharmaceutical company Changchun Changsheng Biotechnology had fabricated records and been forced to stop manufacturing rabies vaccines was first reported more than a week ago.

But it exploded on [social media](#) over the weekend, fuelled by a viral essay alleging decades of malfeasance by the company including the bribery of officials to allow low-quality products onto the market.

The origin and veracity of the mysterious post remains unverified, but it touched off a cat-and-mouse game as China's aggressive censors scrambled to prevent its dissemination.

However the damage was done. Millions of angry users shared the essay and other information on product-safety problems in a rare public airing of a touchy national issue.

The China Food and Drug Administration (CFDA) said last week the

problematic rabies vaccine had not left Changsheng's factory, but the company admitted it had shipped a separate sub-standard vaccine.

That vaccine for diphtheria, pertussis and tetanus (DPT) was found by regulators to fail quality standards—but the company revealed that it sold 250,000 doses to Shandong province last year.

As the pressure mounted, further revelations have emerged. Authorities in the northern province of Hebei announced Monday that nearly 150,000 people had received sub-standard DPT vaccines made by another firm, Wuhan Institute of Biological Products.

The problems have rekindled already deep fears over domestically made medicines and driven worried parents online to swap information on obtaining imported vaccines.

"I don't trust the vaccines here anymore," a woman who gave only her surname Zhou told AFP as she waited with her young daughter at a pediatric clinic in Beijing on Tuesday.

Zhou said she was willing to pay for imported products rather than accept those offered for free by the government.

Hong Kong clinics said they have seen a surge in demand for children's vaccines.

Damage control

The government has gone into damage control, with the CFDA saying there was "absolutely no need" for foreign vaccines because China already has a "comprehensive" system for ensuring quality.

Authorities have announced a series of investigations and vowed that

heads would roll for any negligence.

In a sign of the high-level unease, President Xi Jinping—on a trip to Africa—weighed in Monday, calling the vaccine company's actions "vile in nature and shocking", according to state media.

One reason [product safety](#) is such an explosive issue is that children have been among the victims of the worst Chinese scandals of the last decade, including a massive 2008 scandal over milk and baby formula tainted by the chemical melamine, which gives the appearance of higher protein levels.

The adulteration killed six infants and left tens of thousands hospitalised, rocking China's dairy sector and leading to a regulatory shake-up.

"This time, it deals with babies, and the volume is a lot. That's why people are concerned with it," said Scarlett Pong, president of the Pharmaceutical Society of Hong Kong, where wealthier Chinese parents often travel to access foreign medicines.

Experts say Chinese authorities are gradually improving supervision, but the country's vastness and lack of openness means it will remain a long-term battle.

"I think whoever comes up to be the political leader in the future, they will have to fulfil the demands from the public. The world is much more open now, citizens know a lot of things," Pong said.

Deja vu

The CFDA announced late Sunday that it had ordered all production stopped at Changchun Changsheng and police have opened a criminal investigation, detaining its chairwoman and four subordinates for

investigation.

Jilin province, where the company is based, said Tuesday it also would open a corruption investigation into government officials involved.

But many jaded consumers have heard it all before.

"The problem is who is doing the investigation," said one angry commentator on the Twitter-like Weibo microblogging platform.

"If you're just investigating yourself, what kind of results will come out?"

Following a previous major vaccine scare in 2016, officials detained more than 200 people, promising to plug what Premier Li Keqiang described at the time as "many regulatory loopholes".

But some social media users this week have pointed sardonically to Sun Xianze, the official in charge of food safety during the 2008 milk scandal.

Sun was later promoted to deputy director of the CFDA, with responsibility for drug safety, where he worked until February.

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