Unregulated and on the Rise: The Latest Craze Shaking Up Online Drug Markets

By Dan Burke, ASOP Board Member; Director of Intelligence & Investigations, U.S. Anti-Doping Agency; Former Division Chief, FDA-Office of Criminal Investigations.

The rapid rise of peptides is often framed as a scientific or regulatory debate. But from an enforcement perspective, the more immediate issue is the expansion of an unregulated online drug marketplace that is putting patients at risk.

While peptide-based therapies have legitimate medical applications, the surge in medicines sold online reflects a familiar pattern: products entering the market faster than regulatory systems can respond.

A limitless supply of Selective Androgen Receptor Modulators (SARMs), hormone replacement therapies, steroids and peptides labeled as "research chemicals" are being sold through the same illicit online networks that traffic in a host of other counterfeit and unapproved medicines, reaching consumers directly with little accountability: no medical evaluation, no prescription required, no regulation. This is not a theoretical concern; it is a patient safety issue where individuals are purchasing substances with no verified composition, no quality controls, and no clinical validation.

As I noted in previous reporting, this illegal market for "research chemicals" is growing quickly in part because existing legal and regulatory frameworks were never designed for the scale and speed of online distribution. "The bad guys know it, and that's why the stuff proliferates."

While "research chemicals" are often discussed in the context of doping, the reality is much broader. The same substances that raise concerns for athletes are now being marketed to everyday consumers for performance, recovery, and wellness without assurance of safety, quality, or even accurate labeling.

At the center of this issue are active pharmaceutical ingredients (APIs). These substances are effectively APIs being distributed outside of a regulated pharmaceutical framework. Without manufacturing standards, quality controls, and supply chain transparency, there is no reliable way to verify what these products contain or the effect they will have on humans. That "API" could be nothing more than tap water or mold. I know, because I worked on a few of those cases.

From an enforcement standpoint, the core issue is safety. The online environment continues to accelerate this challenge, enabling global distribution of unapproved drugs with minimal oversight.

The path forward is not to accommodate this parallel market, but to prevent its normalization by reinforcing the distinction between regulated supply chains and unregulated supply chains.

This is not about limiting innovation. It is about protecting patients in an environment where online access has outpaced oversight.