

# Los Angeles Times

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To the judges,

I am writing to nominate the Los Angeles Times series “Peddling Death: Fentanyl in Mexican Pharmacies” for the Anthony Shadid Award for Journalism Ethics. Written by Times reporters Keri Blakinger, Connor Sheets and Brittany Mejia, this investigation required making difficult ethical decisions about what to report and how to best serve readers without endangering the safety of reporting subjects, the general public and the reporters themselves.

For more than six years, American tourists have been overdosing and dying after taking fentanyl- and methamphetamine-tainted counterfeit pills they purchased from Mexican pharmacies. The Times uncovered and documented this deadly scourge during visits to 10 border cities and vacation spots across Mexico in 2023.

The reporters visited dozens of pharmacies where they purchased 114 narcotic medications – including painkillers such as Percocet and ADHD medications such as Adderall – all sold over the counter without a prescription. They then tested the pills, first by using test strips in Mexico, and then by having samples tested by a laboratory with the capability to do more detailed mass spectrometer testing. The results were striking: about 62% of the pills were fake. Overall, 29 of the samples reporters tested last year contained fentanyl and 26 contained methamphetamine.

Once the reporters confirmed the prevalence of this phenomenon in Mexican pharmacies, they set out to determine whether individual deaths could be linked to these fake pills. They were ultimately able to identify and verify the deaths of seven Americans as a result of fentanyl-tainted, fake pills sold by Mexican pharmacies since 2017.

This series required balancing the need to expose grave public health risks with important ethical concerns and the danger associated with reporting on criminal activity in a country known for violence against reporters and their subjects.

One key ethical quandary reporters faced was whether to identify pharmacies and their employees by name. While naming drug stores and chains that sell deadly counterfeit pills could save lives, it could also put their owners and employees at risk of reprisal by cartels or corrupt law enforcement. The Times had to compare the relative benefits of notifying the public of which pharmacies to avoid versus the real risks that identifying specific shops and people could pose.

After extensive consultation with editors, cartel experts and others with relevant knowledge, the reporters chose not to include the names of pharmacies, except for one chain with a number of stores. Because naming this regional chain didn't single out any specific shops, the potential for employees to be targeted was greatly reduced, while the fact that it had numerous locations made it so naming the chain was potentially of great value to members of the public, who could use that knowledge to make smart choices about where to shop for pharmaceuticals.

The Times decided against naming pharmacy workers and owners. The Times determined that identifying people who are simply trying to make a living – and thereby opening them up to potential violence or arrest – would have been unethical and unsafe. It also remains unclear how aware many drug store employees and owners are that they are selling tainted pills.

Despite this, the reporters did everything they could to provide readers with enough information to purchase medications safely in Mexico by detailing the types of pharmacies to be wary of: individual drug stores and small chains in tourist and border towns, especially those that are willing to sell loose pills over the counter. This vital information was conveyed to the public via these stories and in videos produced by one of the reporters and shared widely on social media.

This series has spurred a far-reaching international response. Here's just some of that impact:

Members of Congress and American and Mexican officials called for action within days of the first story's publication. In March, the U.S. State Department issued an unprecedented warning urging travelers to "exercise caution" if they visit pharmacies in Mexico, citing the investigation.

A top federal prosecutor in Mexico said the Times' reporting was the first authorities there had heard of pharmacies selling counterfeit, fentanyl-laced pills. She said she planned to send the article to local law enforcement agencies "so they can ... make visits to these pharmacies."

Mexican authorities made good on the prosecutor's promise, raiding more than 200 pharmacies across multiple Mexican states in response to the Times' reporting. The sweeps resulted in dozens of drug stores being shut down for violations including the illicit sale of controlled substances, arrests and the seizure of thousands of pills.

The Times investigation also showed that members of Congress, officials at the U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency and State Department, and even now-Vice President Kamala Harris knew for years that counterfeit pills from Mexican pharmacies are killing Americans but failed to act.

Three stories to receive closest consideration:

[Some pharmacies in Mexico passing off fentanyl, meth as legitimate pharmaceuticals](#)  
[Hidden panels, counterfeit bottles, fentanyl: A year of buying drugs in Mexican pharmacies](#)  
[Feds knew for years fentanyl-tainted pills from Mexican pharmacies were killing Americans](#)

Other stories from this series for additional consideration:

[Tainted pills from Mexican pharmacies kept killing Americans even after U.S. knew of threat](#)  
[Harris, Feinstein told in 2018 of American killed by fentanyl pills from Mexican pharmacy](#)  
[Fentanyl-tainted pills now found in Mexican pharmacies from coast to coast](#)  
[Some Mexican pharmacies are selling full bottles of Adderall. But it's actually meth.](#)  
[U.S. issues warning about Mexican pharmacies selling tainted, counterfeit pills](#)  
[Mexican authorities shutter pharmacies in Yucatán, citing threat of counterfeit pills](#)

Email addresses for the three Times reporters who produced this investigative series:

- Keri Blakinger: [keri.blakinger@latimes.com](mailto:keri.blakinger@latimes.com)
- Connor Sheets: [connor.sheets@latimes.com](mailto:connor.sheets@latimes.com)
- Brittany Mejia: [brittany.mejia@latimes.com](mailto:brittany.mejia@latimes.com)

I was the lead editor on the project and am proud to nominate this reporting for the Anthony Shadid Award for Journalism Ethics.

Sincerely,

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