

China says toys had toxic substance

By SCOTT McDONALD, Associated Press Writer

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China's safety watchdog confirmed Saturday that toy beads recalled in the United States and Australia after sickening children contain a substance that can turn into the "date-rape" drug after ingested.

The toys, coated with the industrial chemical 1,4-butanediol, were made by the Wangqi Product Factory in Shenzhen, a city just over the border from Hong Kong, the General Administration of Quality Supervision, Inspection, and Quarantine said in a statement.

When ingested, the chemical metabolizes into the "date-rape" drug gamma hydroxy butyrate, also known as GHB, which can cause breathing problems, loss of consciousness, seizures, drowsiness, coma and death.

Millions of units of the popular toys, which are sold as Aqua Dots in the United States and as Bindeez in Australia, were recalled in those countries as well as Britain, Malaysia, Singapore and elsewhere this past week after children began falling sick from swallowing the toy's bead-like parts.

The recall is the latest in a slew of product quality scandals that has tarnished China's image as an exporter of reliable goods. The government has tried to shore up the country's reputation by increasing inspections, selectively punishing companies and launching a publicity campaign to boost quality.

The toys are manufactured for Australia-based Moose Enterprises, and production was outsourced to Wangqi by a Hong Kong agent, the safety watchdog said. It did not identify the Hong Kong company.

"The Shenzhen factory started to produce the bead toys after its trial products provided to the agent received no objection," the state-run Xinhua News Agency said.

At least nine children in the U.S. and three in Australia have fallen sick.

A man identifying himself as Mr. Liang who answered the phone at Wangqi confirmed the company made toys but said he did not know if the toys were the same ones in the recalls. Liang said the company's managers were not available to comment.

The Chinese government has already suspended exports of the toys, the safety watchdog said.

The watchdog said it asked the United States for information on the medical problems the children suffered because of the toys so that it can carry out more tests.

Companies worldwide have increasingly outsourced manufacturing, often choosing Chinese factories for their cost and quality. But heated competition among factories and the rising cost of labor, land and fuel have sometimes put pressure on profits, causing some producers to cut corners.

In the latest case, the Aqua Dots or Bindeez were supposed to have been coated with nontoxic 1,5-pentanediol, a chemical commonly used in computer printer ink. But that chemical generally sells for three or four times the price of the toxic compound found on the tainted toys, 1,4-butanediol.

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