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Farce mask: it's safe for only 20 minutes

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Retailers who cash in on community fears about SARS by exaggerating the health benefits of surgical masks could face fines of up to \$110,000.

NSW Fair Trading Minister Reba Meagher yesterday warned that distributors and traders could be prosecuted if it was suggested the masks offered unrealistic levels of protection from the disease.

"I'm sure everyone would agree that it is un-Australian to profiteer from people's fears and anxieties," Ms Meagher said.

"There appears to be some debate about whether surgical masks are able to minimise the effects of SARS."

Ms Meagher said her department would investigate any complaints about false mask claims which concerned the public.

"Penalties can range from fines of up to \$22,000 for an individual or \$110,000 for a corporation," she said.

Health authorities have warned that surgical masks may not be an effective protection against the virus.

"Those masks are only effective so long as they are dry," said Professor Yvonne Cossart of the Department of Infectious

Diseases at the University of Sydney.

"As soon as they become saturated with the moisture in your breath they stop doing their job and pass on the droplets."

Professor Cossart said that could take as little as 15 or 20 minutes, after which the mask would need to be changed. But those warnings haven't stopped people snapping up the masks, with retailers reporting they are having trouble keeping up with demand.

John Bell from the Pharmaceutical Society of Australia, who owns a pharmacy in Woollahra, Sydney, said mask supplies were running low.

"At the moment we don't have any because we haven't been able to get any in the last few days," Mr Bell said. "In the early stages it was unbelievable; we'd get people coming in all the time."

Mr Bell agreed with Professor Cossart's assessment regarding the effectiveness of the masks.

"I think they're of marginal benefit," he said. "In a way they give some comfort to people who think they're doing as much as they can do to prevent the infection."

That seems to be the mentality of travellers to Asian destinations, who are buying and wearing the masks while overseas.

Rosemary Taylor, of Kirribilli, arrived in Sydney from Shanghai last week after a two-week holiday in China. Ms Taylor and travelling companion Joan Switzer had worn the masks during the trip home, even though they had been warned they were of little value.

"We were told you need 16 layers on your mask for it to offer 95 per cent protection," Ms Taylor said.