

On Importation!

The laws governing the sale and distribution of prescription drugs and those who enforce them are working against pharmacists and the patients they serve

by Christopher J. Decker, RPh

Could Wisconsin Governor Jim Doyle have changed the state song from *On Wisconsin* to *On Importation*? To Wisconsin's pharmacists and the public closely following this issue, it sure may seem so.

Wisconsin pharmacists have reason to be upset. The laws governing the sale and distribution of prescription drugs, and the individuals responsible for enforcing those laws, seemingly are working against them. Consumers should be upset too. Directing people who need health care services in our Wisconsin communities to Canada for their medicines is an easy out for politicians who choose not to address the pricing of prescription drugs in this country head on. We need better ideas, we need better strategies and we need better solutions that will work for us all over the long term.

Federal law expressly prohibits the importation of prescription drugs into the United States from other countries, except in rare circumstances. Yet the practice is exploding. It is estimated that in 2003, U.S. consumers purchased \$1-1.5 billion of prescription drugs just from Canada. Governor Doyle and Minnesota Governor Pawlenty have used state resources to create and maintain Web sites that promote importation of prescription drugs from Canadian pharmacies. In a few other states, city mayors have implemented programs for city employees to receive prescription drugs from Canada as part of their health insurance benefit. And tens of thousands of individuals across the country are acting independently to purchase prescription drugs for themselves and their family members. How can this be?

Access to lower cost prescription

drugs and the prices of prescription drugs are perhaps the most politically popular issues of the day. Few people in Wisconsin, if any, are unaware of the campaign call for less expensive drugs. In fact, most are participating in the call. Polls indicate the public favors importation of prescription drugs from Canada by a 10-1 margin. Although most of the Wisconsin public is aware of the issue, few are familiar with the law governing it (or at least the laws that are supposed to be governing it). Also noteworthy is that of those individuals importing drugs from Canada,

Oh Canada!
U.S. consumers spent an estimated \$1 to \$1.5 billion on prescription drugs from Canada in 2003.

nearly all would prefer to receive prescription drugs through a U.S. pharmacy.

PSW has been in the center of this political maelstrom. Here's why: **PSW's mission is to provide leadership in advocacy, education and pharmacy practice that improves patient care through the safe and effective use of medications.** Circumventing the U.S. health care system, ignoring the state and federal laws governing the control of prescription drugs and bypassing Wisconsin's pharmacists on the way to Canada in search of cheaper medications is diametrically opposed to PSW's mission. PSW has spoken out and will continue to speak out on this issue. All of Wisconsin pharmacy must speak out.

But what should we say? That we are opposed to importation? No, not necessarily. That we demand our elected officials adhere to the laws governing the sale and distribution of prescription drugs? Yes, absolutely. That there are potential problems associated with importing prescription drugs from outside the U.S. health care system? Certainly. That the professional services provided by Wisconsin's pharmacists are eliminated as drugs are treated as a commodity and purchased elsewhere? That's an important message that is not being heard nor adequately considered.

Obviously the reason the public has taken to the idea of importing prescription drugs from Canada is that brand name drugs are generally less expensive there than in the United States; sometimes dramatically less expensive. Canada is not alone in its effort to control prescription drug prices. Most of the industrialized nations other than the United States have implemented some form of government price controls for pharmaceuticals. The result? Prices of brand name prescription drugs in the United States are typically the highest in the world.

Governor Doyle admits that he doesn't like having to promote obtaining drugs from Canada. He says that he'd much prefer to direct Wisconsin consumers to Wisconsin pharmacies. And, no doubt he would. But the Governor is prepared to sacrifice Wisconsin businesses for the short term in an effort to bring about a change in the pricing of brand name prescription drugs long term. Is that a good idea? The answer probably depends upon whether the question is put to a consumer or provider of prescription drugs and whether the imported products are, in fact, safe.

The issues of drug importation and prescription drug pricing need further study and consideration. However, policy change must occur soon. The current situation places both consumers and pharmacy businesses at risk. We now operate in a global economy and changes must be made to the international sale and trade of pharmaceuticals. If importation is to be allowed, it should be incorporated in the U.S. health care system and regulated properly. But be assured, allowing importation of prescription drugs from Canada, even through U.S. pharmacies, is not likely to be sustainable. Supply would simply not meet demand.

The Bush Administration has appointed a task force of federal officials who are to evaluate the practice of importation of prescription drugs and issues related to importation. Congress requested a report from the task force by December 1, 2004. HHS Secretary Tommy Thompson, who appointed the task force, said it would likely conclude its work by the end of the summer. PSW and every other pharmacy organization should provide input to the task force.

As long as the use of prescription drugs is treated as a commodity and until the pricing differential between countries is addressed, everyone in pharmacy will continue to be challenged in our attempt to gain recognition of the importance of quality and the value of the services provided by pharmacists. Pharmaceutical manufacturers also will be unable to persuade others to focus on the value of the miracles they make. These issues will continue to take a back seat to prescription drug costs until the pricing inequity is resolved.

Everyone in pharmacy has a stake in how this policy issue is addressed and resolved. Pharmacy providers must have a safe, secure and competitive source of prescription drugs in order to adequately serve their patients. PSW will continue to call for a fair, safe and legal system. As the professionals entrusted with responsibility of overseeing the safe and effective use of prescription drugs, pharmacists must all speak out. Pharmacists are part of the solution, not part of the problem. It's important that the public hear the difference. ●