

Internet Pharmacy: Governments must take action to protect the integrity of the Canadian drug supply

By: Russell Williams

Lawyer Peggy Blair's analysis of Internet pharmacies (*A Win-Win solution: U.S. firms could douse the controversy over Canadian Internet pharmacies by offering discounts to seniors, the most vulnerable group*, July 13, 2004) offers an interesting perspective on this current practice of cross-border reimportation. But suggesting that this activity should be "legitimized" through a code of conduct is contrary to the interest of patients and best health care practices in this country.

There is more to the issue of cross-border reimportation than meets the eye.

A vital component of Canada's health care system is being threatened through the Internet Pharmacy export of Canadian prescription drugs.

Increasing volumes of prescription drugs, intended for Canadian patients, are being diverted to the United States.

Canadians are not only concerned about the growing number of U.S. citizens, states, and cities supporting prescription drug importation from Canada, they are also concerned about the potential negative impact of this activity on prescription drug supplies for Canadian patients.

A pot of gold?

It is estimated that 150 Internet Pharmacy exporters operate in Canada, filling thousands of orders a day, most of which end up south of the border. According to recent research from IMS Health, the volume of prescription drugs exported to the United States through Internet pharmacies has more than doubled from \$250 million in 2002 to almost \$600 million in 2003. This year, that amount is projected to surpass \$1 billion.

Fuelling this growth is the ability of Internet pharmacies to buy prescription drugs at prices controlled by the Canadian governments. While drugs approved by Health Canada for use by patients here at home are exported to the U.S., profits from this opportunistic endeavor are pocketed by individuals with little concern of the impact on our health care system.

The Juggernaut

Several bills have been passed or are before the U.S. Congress that would legalize both individual and commercial importation of drugs from Canada to the United States.

Should our neighbors rely on Canada for their drugs, the consequences would be huge and immediate. To illustrate the significance of such a scenario and the impact it would have on Canada, a University of Texas study released in May of this year indicates that if U.S. residents were to purchase their prescription drugs from Canada, the annual supply of Canadian drugs could dry up in about a month.

Canadian prescription drug supplies are generated to meet Canadian patient demand. Simply put, their diversion to U.S. citizens means they are not available to Canadians. In Manitoba alone, research released in March 2004 by the Pharmacy Alliance for Canadians, which includes major drug chain stores and independent pharmacists, found that Internet Pharmacy companies were diverting more than 40% of Manitoba's drug supply to the United States.

Shortages of critically important prescription drugs could result from the diversion of our medicines to the U.S. Should this occur, it would not only undermine confidence in Canadian supplies, it will also justifiably raise the ire and concern of Canadians right across this land.

Canadians speak out

Many Canadian medical, pharmacy and patient groups have expressed serious concerns or opposition to Internet Pharmacy exports to the U.S., including: the Canadian Medical Association (CMA), the Canadian Pharmacists Association (CPhA), numerous Provincial Colleges of Physicians and Surgeons, and the National Association of Pharmacy Regulatory Authorities (NAPRA).

Other groups such as the Association for the Fifty-Plus (CARP), the Canadian Hepatitis C Network, The Canadian Treatment Action Council (CTAC), and The Best Medicines Coalition, have also spoken out against this practice.

Rx&D calls on the federal and provincial governments to take action and work with health care partners to ensure prescription medicines approved for sale in Canada and meant for Canadian patients, stay here.

Monitoring the situation, such as Health Canada is doing, only confirms the problem and leaves the perception that "everything is okay," when, in fact, it is not. For patients being told there is a shortage of their medicines once it has occurred will bring little comfort or relief.

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