

Boston, N.H., Vt. city to buy drugs from Canada

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BOSTON (AP) — Pharmacist Gregory Laham knows that prescription drugs are expensive. But the remedy of buying cheaper medication in bulk from Canada is a "prescription for disaster," he said.

The owner of Sullivan's Pharmacy & Medical Supply in the city's Roslindale neighborhood said buying drugs from Canada would take business away from pharmacies, bring dangerous counterfeit drugs into the county, and damage the relationship between doctors and patients, Laham said.

"There's something very wrong with this picture," Laham told Boston city councilors at a recent hearing. Laham was among supporters and opponents of Mayor Tom Menino's plan to allow some city employees to buy drugs from Canada starting July 1.

The same day Menino made his announcement, New Hampshire Gov. Craig Benson also said his state would purchase drugs from Canada. Burlington, Vt. Mayor Peter Clavelle said his city would also do so starting March 1. Springfield was the first city in the nation to start buying drugs from Canada.

The Boston and New Hampshire plans were announced a day after President Bush signed the Medicare prescription drug bill, which forbids reimportation of Canadian drugs unless the U.S. Health and Human Services Department certifies their safety. So far, the department has refused to do so.

Prescription drug costs were the central topic at the recent Boston hearing. But politics were also at play.

Some of those present in support of "drug reimportation" from Canada took swipes at the U.S. Congress for the recent Medicare overhaul, and at President Bush for signing the law. They also criticized the federal Food and Drug Administration for not allowing the practice.

The FDA reiterated its warnings against any importation of drugs.

"For the mayor of Boston or anyone else to presume that they can make drugs safe simply by saying they are safe is extremely risky behavior," said Peter Pitts, FDA's associate commissioner for external affairs. "The public servants of Boston deserve better than a gimmick."

Boston's 15,000 employees and retirees have drug costs covered in two ways: through outside health plans, or directly by the city. The second group, about 7,000 people who are mostly retirees, will have the option of buying from Canada. The program would cut about \$1 million each year from the city's \$61 million prescription drug bill, according to city estimates.

"As we see it, this is an issue that demands attention, and demands a response," said Dennis DiMarzio, Boston's chief operating officer.

New Hampshire Gov. Craig Benson announced the state Department of Corrections would begin buying drugs from Canada for prisoners. He said the state would save money on nine of 10 drugs most commonly prescribed for prisoners. The state also will buy Medicaid drugs from Canada when that price is lower than the state's share of the Medicaid price.

The state will post a Web site within 10 days providing links to Canadian pharmacies where any New Hampshire resident can get a prescription filled. The pharmacies listed on the Web site will be approved as safe by the state, Benson said.

"It's time we stood up as a state and did the right thing and allowed citizens to purchase drugs from the most affordable supplier," Benson said.

Burlington, the largest city in Vermont, has 600 employees, but Clavelle said he wants to expand the prescription option to other Vermonters.

"I'm hopeful to create a program that would reach school employees, city retirees and other citizens," he said.

Janice Bourque, president and chief executive of the Massachusetts Biotechnology Council, expressed her opposition. She said such plans would smother innovation, and were a form of unfair price control.

"Investors will not invest if they think there are forms of price control, and this is a form of price control. It's not a free market system. It's an artificial, short-term solution," she said. □