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Gov. Blagojevich urges Vermont officials to join the I-SaveRx program
Blagojevich calls on House Speaker Symington and Governor Douglas to pass and sign legislation that authorizes Vermont to join multi-state prescription drug importation program

CHICAGO- Governor Rod Blagojevich today sent letters to Vermont House Speaker Gaye Symington and Governor Jim Douglas urging them to pass and sign legislation that would authorize Vermont to join the I-SaveRx prescription drug program. I-SaveRx is the first state sponsored program in the nation to allow residents to import prescription drugs from state inspected and approved suppliers in Canada, Ireland, and the United Kingdom at savings between 25 and 50 percent. The House legislation, if passed, would give Vermont Governor Jim Douglas authorization to enter Vermont into the program. The Vermont Senate passed a similar bill unanimously last week.

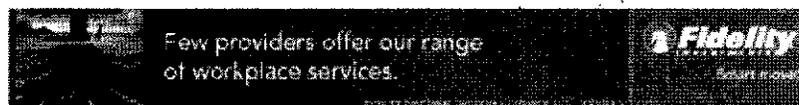
“In an ideal world, our leaders in Washington, D.C. would tackle the issue of high prescription drug costs and find a way to give all Americans access to better prices on the world market. But in the meantime, states like Illinois, Wisconsin, Missouri and Kansas have taken the initiative to help our own residents get the medications they need at prices they can afford. We hope Vermont will become our next partner in the I-SaveRx program,” said Governor Blagojevich.

Gov. Blagojevich launched I-SaveRx on October 4, 2004, and extended an invitation to other states to join the program. Currently, the program is available to the residents of Illinois, Wisconsin, Missouri and Kansas.

Vermont’s Senate Finance Committee introduced Vermont’s legislation after the Food and Drug Administration turned down a request for the state to set up a pilot program to allow the import of prescription drugs from countries like Canada. Vermont’s Attorney General is currently in court trying to force the FDA to approve the program.

Illinois first began exploring the feasibility of drug importation in September of 2003 when the Governor commissioned a study on the pharmaceutical system in Canada. In the spring of 2004, the Governor expanded the review to Europe as well. Public health and regulatory experts from the State researched the pharmaceutical systems in Canada and Western Europe to determine if the systems were safe and if Illinoisans could realize significant savings by purchasing medications from foreign sources. In August 2004, the Governor’s prescription drug advocates released their final report indicating that – like Canada – the European prescription drug system was well-regulated and was able to provide the same medications available in the United States at much lower prices.

Residents of Illinois, Wisconsin, Missouri and Kansas can begin the enrollment process or get more information by visiting the website, www.I-Saverx.net, or calling toll-free, 1-866-ISAVE-33. The clearinghouse provides users with information on the list of medications included in the program, prices in each of the three countries and enrollment forms and guidance.

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Bucking legalities and safety concerns, states push Rx imports

By: Kelley M. Blessingame

Food and Drug Administration Commissioner Mark McClellan is fighting what must feel like a lonely, uphill battle.

There's no question: The Food, Drug and Cosmetic Act prohibits U.S. consumers from importing prescription drugs from foreign nations. However, over the past year, McClellan has been buffeted on all sides in his efforts to enforce the law - by consumers, physicians and even elected officials, who, like he, are charged to uphold the law. The latest slaps:

* Minnesota Governor Tim Pawlenty in October signed into law the nation's first statewide program to facilitate the purchase of prescription drugs from Canadian pharmacies. Through the landmark plan, Minnesotans will be able to buy medicines online from pre-approved Canadian outlets at prices negotiated by the state.

* New Hampshire officials at press time announced that they would launch an Rx importation program in December.

* North Dakota says it will have a program in place next year.

* Boston Mayor Thomas Menino says that city will begin its own import program in July.

"The time for talk is over," Pawlenty told the St. Paul Pioneer Press. "We need to move forward and drive change. It's not right that Americans must pay more for their prescription drugs."

State and local leaders may get some of their swagger from knowing some federal lawmakers and their constituents are firmly behind them. In July, the U.S. House of Representatives moved to legalize imports nationwide by passing the Pharmaceutical Market Access Act, and a bipartisan bill in the Senate is beginning to pick up momentum.

Add to that the fact that all nine Democratic presidential candidates have stated publicly that they favor legalizing importation, hoping to curry the support of the 70% of Americans who feel the same way, according to an October ABC News-Washington Post poll.

With health premiums rising, the number of uninsured swelling and no Medicare prescription drug benefit, lawmakers seem to believe importation is the best way to offer consumers cost relief, at least over the short term.

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"This is not the final solution," Pawlenty admits, "but it is an accelerant for change. The current situation is intolerable."

Savings trump safety concerns

Canadian officials may be in tacit agreement, as they have not actively sought to stop the flow of pharmaceuticals southward. In a November meeting in Ottawa, McClellan convinced his Health Canada counterparts to share information in regulating Canada's Internet pharmacies, from where most prescription imports originate. And while Canadian officials agreed to keep a closer eye on Internet drug sales, McClellan may have ruffled a few feathers during the visit by implying medicines imported from Canada are less safe than those in the States.

"It's very clear that Canada's safety record is second to none internationally," asserts Health Canada Assistant Deputy Minister Diane Gorman. Canadian International Pharmacy Association general counsel John Myers was more blunt. "[McClellan's] got a lot of nerve," he told The Boston Globe. "Health Canada really doesn't need other countries to tell it how to do its job."

Emboldened by their nation's hands-off treatment of exports to U.S. consumers, a group of six Canadian pharmacies, known as the Super Six, has announced it will ensure any state or city that wants to purchase Canadian medicines can do so.

"With a large and fast-growing number of cities and states seeking more affordable Canadian medications, our six pharmacies can serve the special needs they have for lower drug costs," reads a Super Six statement.

However, as the Canadian health system is not set up to withstand demand from American consumers, and pharmaceutical companies Eli Lilly and GlaxoSmithKline have reduced drug shipments to Canada hoping to curb U.S. shipments, the supply-demand equation is quickly falling out of balance.

Barry Power, director of practice development for the Canadian Pharmacists Association, does the math: "The Canadian system can accommodate 30 million people, and the American population is about 300 million. So if just 10% of Americans access prescription drugs from Canada, it spells disaster." He notes that some Canadian pharmacies have begun to report drug shortages and price increases for online shipments.

While FDA has gone to great lengths to prove the public health risk importation poses, import advocates seem to remain undeterred. Dana Noble, executive director of the North American Pharmotherapeutic Consultants Association (NA-PCA), a group that seeks to allay safety concerns surrounding imports through a standardized accreditation process, says U.S. mail order pharmacies may be just as unsafe.

"I get my prescriptions [via mail order], and my medicines come in an unsealed bottle with no manufacturer ID," she reveals. "And this is from one of the largest mail-order pharmacies in the country. We've put the focus on Canada with the assumption [American] processes are the best, and they might not be."

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Accreditation is the key to regulating the safety of [mail-order medicines], no matter what country they're coming from."

Although import safety remains debatable, there is no getting around that imports do lower prescription drug costs, which seems to make breaking the law worthwhile. And although FDA officials vow to keep fighting the good fight, they are beginning to sound defeated on the import issue.

"We've been talking about the risks of drug importing and the importance of FDA authority over safety since 1999," FDA Senior Associate Commissioner William Hubbard told The Washington Post. "But it seems like people don't want to hear our message any more."

Former FDA commissioner Donald Kennedy added import programs "just may be a bad idea whose time has come." - K.B.

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