

Internet pharmacy issue needs more attention

by: Denis Morrice

President, The Arthritis Society and Co-chair, Best Medicines Coalition

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Internet pharmacies selling drugs to U.S. customers are leading to a shortage of drugs for Canadians and will cause an increase in the cost of vital medications. Seen from a patient's perspective, the Internet pharmacy issue is actually pretty straightforward. It must be stopped.

Internet pharmacy simply provides drugs to a faceless patient over the World Wide Web. No advice, no counseling, no patient safety net. What do the Canadian Medical and Pharmacists Associations say about putting drugs in the hands of patients they have never seen? Given the remoteness of both the physician and the pharmacist, who is looking out for the patient? Moreover, Internet pharmacies are drawing pharmacists away from the neighborhood pharmacies, reducing the number of pharmacists available to provide these services. The pharmacists, too, are becoming faceless.

There is also some irony in the fact that Health Canada is warning that Canadian Internet pharmacies could cause drug shortages in Canada -- meanwhile, they seem unphased that Canadian patients wait 18 months to two years longer for new medicines than citizens in other countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia and Sweden.

The Americans are coming to Canada via the Internet because of price. Meanwhile, Canadian patients can't even access many new and innovative medications already available in the U.S. because they are caught up in the drug review backlog at Health Canada.

Health Minister Anne McLellan was quoted in *The Globe and Mail* (Oct. 30, 2003) as saying: "My primary obligation and interest in this is to ensure that Canadians have access to high quality drugs when they need them. I have no evidence at this point that that is not happening."

We beg to differ. Granted, Minister McLellan was talking about shortages due to Internet pharmacy, however, there are millions of Canadians who are affected daily by the delays in federal drug review and approval times. Talk to patients and they will tell you that in many cases they do not have "access to high quality drugs when they need them."

In fact, it currently takes an average of 717 days for new drugs to be approved in Canada -- more than double the target of 355 days the federal government has set for itself.

Access to the best medicines is a critical quality of life issue for Canadians living with chronic disease or illness and fundamental to the health-care system. What is truly needed

is a more comprehensive, systematic approach to providing Canadian patients with the best evidence-based medicines at a reasonable price. This also means having patients at the table when decisions are being made about their health.

We need to stop Internet pharmacies and focus on what Canadians really need: safe, timely and equitable access to the best medicines. This means that once approved by Health Canada, a drug should be available to every Canadian in every province or territory, regardless of a person's socioeconomic situation.

The bottom line, amidst all this noise, should be the well-being of Canadian patients. It's about the right drug, to the right person, by the right person, at the right price, at the right time.

For more information about Internet Pharmacy, read the latest issue of *President's Corner* at:

www.arthritis.ca/links/presidentscorner/internetpharmacy12DEC2003

Tell your provincial and federal health ministers that you want Internet pharmacies stopped. Editor