

Pharmacies Without Walls

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Websites and storefronts selling Canadian drugs are proliferating across the country. Direct mailings are being sent to consumers and physicians alike applauding the savings that can be obtained by ordering prescription and non-prescription medication from Canadian pharmacies. Canada's state-sponsored health-care system imposes cost controls on prescription drugs; thus, pharmacies can offer drugs to consumers at anywhere from a 20 percent to sometimes more than 50 percent savings compared to U.S. pharmacies.

Savings, but at what price! The Colorado Pharmacists Society has cautioned consumers against buying imported drugs because the Food and Drug Administration doesn't inspect the pharmaceuticals and therefore, cannot guarantee that these drugs are safe or effective.

A handful of disparate interest groups have urged Colorado regulators to begin overseeing Canadian pharmacies' sale of prescription drugs to Colorado residents. The trade is unregulated by the state because it violates federal law. Consumer advocates, Colorado-based pharmacists, and Canadian drug importers want the state to force Canadian pharmacies to abide by the same quality and safety standards as U.S. mail order pharmacies doing business here. During a recent legislative session, the Colorado attorney general's office suggested that the state begin licensing Canadian pharmacies. However, state officials worry that by



licensing Canadian pharmacies in Colorado, the state would be endorsing illegal behavior. In the U.S., the FDA prohibits businesses from reselling drugs that were manufactured here and exported to other countries. The agency also bars consumers from bringing drugs into the U.S. that are not FDA approved. The only exception is for those individuals who have a dire medical condition that can only be treated by drugs not readily available in the U.S. Consumers who buy a ninety-day supply of prescription drugs from Canada, either through a website, mail order service, or by traveling north of the border are violating federal law. To date, the FDA has not actively enforced these laws.

Consumer watchdogs favor licensing Canadian pharmacies to ensure patients who purchase drugs online or through the mail get quality medications and continue to have access to affordable prescriptions. Canadian drug importers are eager to gain legitimacy in Colorado and boost their business here. Colorado pharmacies that compete with Canada for business want to limit the amount of competition from north of the border. However, independent pharmacists from Colorado say they support state regulation of Canadian competitors because they fear for patients' safety under the current unregulated system. The Colorado department of regulatory agency is studying potential changes to Colorado law this summer and will publish its recommendations on the Canadian pharmaceutical trade in early October.

Since the Canadian pharmacies and websites are not licensed by the state or regulated by the state or federal authorities, there is no oversight ensuring the efficacy, potency or safety of medications obtained through these sources. It is also against federal law at the present time to prescribe medications to be filled outside of the country. Therefore, the physicians at Colorado Allergy and Asthma Centers do not recommend or endorse the use of Canadian and Internet Pharmacies by our patients at this time. Both the Colorado Legislature and the US Congress are reviewing this issue, so new guidance may follow in the future.



References

Canada Rx May Face State Controls, M. Austin, [The Denver Post](#), July 2003