Our Neighbor’s Rx Cost Less

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It doesn’t make sense…

A prescription for Celebrex, a commonly prescribed drug to alleviate the pain from arthritis costs $205.79 for 30, 200 mg. capsules. That same dosage of drug in Canada costs $88.00. Increasing our incredulity and ire, we learn that Pfizer, one of the conglomerates ruling the global pharmaceutical market, produces Celebrex — and Pfizer is headquartered in the United States!

In fact, the U.S. remains the largest single producer of prescription drugs, followed by Japan.

Yet prescription drugs sold to our neighbors to the north continue to cost less for the consumer, much less, than in our country. To add fodder to our righteous outrage, consider the EpiPen, carried by many to counter life-threatening allergic reactions, which costs more than $600 in the U.S. compared to $290 in Canada. Or the heartburn drug, Nexium, where one 40 mg. pill costs $7.78 in our pharmacies, but less than half that price, $3.37, in Canada.

Almost two decades ago, I joined a busload of people from the Cleveland area for a trip to Windsor, Canada, to have my mother’s prescriptions filled, at half the price they would be in Cleveland. The trip was one of many sponsored by Congressman Sherrod Brown (now Senator Brown). My mother suffered from COPD, and her limited income simply did not cover the cost of the medications she needed. During the ride to Windsor, I heard the horror stories of several of my bus mates. One had tried to go without his medication, and landed up in the hospital. Another, in breast cancer treatment, was on Tamoxifen for five years. At the time, the dosage of the drug she needed cost $100 in Cleveland; she had her prescription filled in Canada for $10. Prices in the U.S. and Canada have risen and fallen, and some drugs like Tamoxifen have come down significantly. However, drug prices in Canada, less than a three hour drive from Allegany, continue to average about 40 percent lower than in our country.

How can Canada do it? Canada’s government negotiates drug prices, unlike the U.S. where pharmaceutical companies can set their own price tags. In addition, direct to consumer advertising, which inflates costs, is outlawed in Canada. Actually, the United States and New Zealand are the only countries that allow such advertising.

At present, we can’t clone our neighbor’s health care system. But we can allow the importation of lower cost prescription drugs from Canada and from other countries whose drugs are manufactured by the same companies under the same conditions. That would be one vital step in helping us appreciate the role government can play in providing quality and affordable health care to all of us.

The good news is that there *is* legislation that’s been introduced in both Houses of Congress to do just that: It’s HR 1776 (S.771), *Improving Access to Affordable Prescription Drugs Act.* November elections are just around the corner, and health care remains voters’ primary issue. Voters need to counter the influence of the 1,330 registered pharmaceutical company lobbyists! Check the stand of our two candidates for Congress on importation of prescription drugs and other areas of the legislation, and vote accordingly.

Now that makes sense!