

Prescription Drug Costs: A Headache Pills Can't Cure

By Irwin Shanes
Administrator, CSA Welfare Funds

Drug costs continue to be the most costly of all the medical expenses our members incur. National surveys find that drug costs have even replaced hospitalization costs as the leading medical expense.

Advancement in medical technology, an increase in outpatient medical and surgical procedures which reduce the need for in-patient hospital stays, the advancement in prescription drug therapies and diagnostic laboratory and radiation technology have all contributed to reduced hospitalization stays.

We are all extremely grateful to our medical and scientific community for the advancement of treatment and technological tools that have been made available to practitioners. We are also grateful to the prescription drug manufacturers for the research and development efforts which have made new and more effective treatment options available. However, we are troubled by the fact that profits made by the drug companies far exceed research and development costs.

Certainly, drug manufacturers and their stockholders deserve to be rewarded for the financial risks they take. They must be encouraged to continue their efforts to produce the drugs we need to improve and extend our lives. But profits beyond the cost of research and development must be controlled so that those who need those drugs can afford to buy them without having to make a choice between the prescription drug and food on the table. Too many people, especially the elderly on fixed incomes, do without needed prescription drugs or dangerously ration their drugs, taking one pill instead of the prescribed two in order to stretch their dollar. Many do without basic foods, articles of clothing or minimal entertainment, so important to the quality of life. What good is good health when life itself becomes only an existence? The level of fear and depression among the elderly caused by unaffordable drug costs is real and unacceptable.

It is also unacceptable for drug companies to charge more in America for their drugs than they do for the same drugs sold in other countries. States such as Maine have passed laws banning the sale of drugs which are being sold elsewhere -- such as Canada -- for a lower price. State Senator John Marchi recently introduced similar legislation in New York and there is action in Congress to introduce such legislation on a Federal level.

There is much more to be done and each of us must get involved individually and as members of such organization as CSA, RSSA, AFSA, **COMRO**, and AARP to get our legislators to:

1. Enact legislation to include prescription drug coverage under Medicare
2. Enact legislation to limit manufacturers to a reasonable profit for the drugs they produce, while providing incentives for expanded research and development.
3. Enact legislation to limit direct advertising by drug companies. Direct advertising is one of the major reasons for increased drug prices. As a result of direct advertising by pharmaceutical companies, patients are now insisting that their doctors prescribe certain drugs, whether they really need them or not. If we can restrict advertising for alcohol and tobacco, we should be able to restrict pharmaceuticals advertising.

In addition to the above, it is also important that you use wisely your Welfare Fund or City provided Prescription Drug Plan. You can save yourself and your plan a great deal of money by using your drug plan more effectively.

- Encourage your doctor to prescribe generic rather than brand named medication wherever appropriate for your health.
- Use the mail away program for drugs you use repeatedly. You and your plan will save a great deal of money and help control costs.

We must all work together or this headache will never get better.