

Cost and Quality Concerns: Seeking Answers and Solutions

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High on the list of concerns about medication is their cost. For millions of Americans with inadequate or no prescription coverage, the increasingly high costs of medicines have become a barrier to healthy living. The search for more affordable drugs from other countries, while supported by some, has led to dire warnings of potential harm by others. What does this mean? Are drugs purchased from other countries safe? Are such purchases legal? Are safe, low cost alternatives available within the U.S.? Where can people find answers and solutions?

A good place to begin is at the doctor's office, where answers to many questions about availability and safety of lower costing drugs can be found. More importantly, by alerting doctors to problems with paying for particular prescribed drugs, patients may find they have strong allies for easing or solving this problem. Doctors can often help by prescribing equally effective, lower cost generic drugs, or even lower cost brand name drugs that are longstanding and effective vs. newer and more costly. They may also be able to provide patients with free samples or with information about private and state-sponsored pharmacy assistance programs (such as [New York State's EPIC program](#)). Pharmacists can help with this information, as well.

While turning to generic drugs and/or prescription assistance programs may help some people, others are increasingly turning to other countries where they can purchase drugs at greatly lowered prices. Critics of this practice voice valid concerns regarding its legality and safety. Is the quality of drug xyz, purchased out-of-country equal to the quality of xyz purchased in the US? Is it safe? Is it legal? If you ask drug manufacturers, their answer will be, "NO", it is unsafe. Before dismissing this claim as being entirely self-serving, however, readers should note that the FDA agrees, saying it cannot guarantee the safety of medications purchased across borders¹. It also says it's illegal to make such purchases. And efforts to change this are not likely to succeed anytime soon². Thus far, however, the FDA selectively enforces the law – targeting pharmacies that ship prescription drugs into the US and not individuals who purchase non-narcotic medications³.

Safety, then, remains the primary concern for all would-be purchasers and their advocates. Understanding that there are always risks of purchasing unsafe prescription drugs, how can people figure out if there is a low or high risk of purchasing unsafe drugs from another country? One way, it seems, may be to look at the way that country regulates the production and sale of prescription drugs. According to a recent article in *AARP The Magazine*⁴, buyers who purchase drugs in Mexico – which has less stringent requirements for the production of drugs – have a high risk of, among other things,

purchasing drugs that are counterfeit or expired, are bad substitutions for their prescribed drug, or have different inactive ingredients which can affect the rate of absorption of the medication. Even if drugs are legitimate, the article reports, they can be of lower quality if they are improperly stored.

Purchasing drugs from Canada, which has a regulatory system that has been found by the (U.S.) Congressional Research Service to be similar to our own system⁵, may be a different story. Although some fear that approval of drug purchases from Canada would lead to it becoming a door into the US for counterfeit drugs and other harmful products from yet other countries, purchasing drugs from Canadian pharmacies, is widely viewed as being fairly safe. With this view in mind, the [Minnesota Senior Federation](#) set out to help patients – throughout America – purchase lower cost drugs by establishing a Canadian Prescription Drug Import Program⁶. Some service restrictions apply for individuals who are not residents of Minnesota. In particular, program administrators will only accept phone calls from Minnesota residents. Nevertheless, several solutions to problems of cost and quality exist.

When considering their options, patients would be well advised to learn what they can about the pros and cons of each. Information provided through the Food and Drug Administration ([FDA](#)) and the National Library of Medicine ([NLM](#)) can help. The AARP web site, with articles from their publication, the [Bulletin](#), is also a good source of information related to cost and quality issues. Visitors to the AARP site will find, as well, a lot of other useful information, including information about state pharmacy assistance programs. Once there, click on “Prescription Drugs”. And just keep reading your papers and magazines. This widely covered issue is one that won’t go away soon.¹

¹ Robert Per, “Senate Votes Again to Allow Importing of Drugs from Canada”, *The New York Times*, June 21, 2003, pg. 13

² Ibid

³ Carl Bialik, “The Best Way to... ..Fill Prescriptions”, *Wall Street Journal*, Nov. 18, 2002.

⁴ Miriam Karmel, “Southern Exposure: Buying Drugs in Mexico is Cheap, Hassle-Free...and Risky”, *AARP The Magazine*, July & August 2003, pp 30-32.

⁵ See note 1

⁶ visit www.mnseniors.net/canadaimport

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