AARP backs Canada drug-import measure

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WASHINGTON -- The AARP yesterday put the weight of its 36 million membership behind a bipartisan bill to legalize the importation of cheaper prescription drugs from Canada, moving the controversial measure closer to consideration by Congress this year.

"Any time AARP supports a bill it's a senior citizen Good Housekeeping seal of approval," said Richard Himelfarb, a political scientist at Hofstra University. "It gives congressmen of all stripes cover to vote for the legislation."

Legalizing the importation of drugs has become a hot-button issue as lawmakers acknowledge mounting pressure from seniors to lower skyrocketing drug costs. In recent weeks, several Republicans have backed away from the party's and the Bush administration's opposition to importation. Republican Sens. Charles Grassley of Iowa and Judd Gregg of New Hampshire, two key players, have introduced separate measures to legalize the practice.

"A lot of smart Republicans are pushing reimportation," said Alan Sager, director of the Health Reform Program at Boston University School of Public Health. They see "that continuing to hug the drug makers in public is not a good idea."

Medicare experts say support is growing among lawmakers, particularly Republicans, in the wake of concerns about Medicare's new drug discount cards. Republicans had banked on the cards' appeal to seniors, a key voting bloc. But seniors have been slow to sign up amid confusion over the multiple cards and fluctuating drug prices.

"There is a real sense among Republicans that drug cards are not going to insulate or help them win elderly voters," Himelfarb said.

PhARMA, the drug industry's trade group, said it will fight efforts to legalize importation. Drug makers cite safety concerns and defend higher drug prices here as being due to the related costs of developing new medicines. Canadian drug prices are regulated by government price controls. "We certainly believe that we have powerful arguments against importation and that we still have time to convey them to key lawmakers," said Jeff Trehwitt, a PhARMA spokesman. He said AARP's support "certainly causes concerns, but the battle is by no means over."

Food and Drug Administration officials also oppose importation.

The bill, supported by lawmakers including Sens. John McCain (R-Ariz.), Olympia Snowe (R-Maine), Hillary Rodham Clinton and Charles Schumer, both Democrats from New York, would allow consumers to import drugs from licensed Canadian pharmacists and wholesalers registered with the U.S. Food and Drug Administration. The drugs must also come from FDA-inspected sites.
AARP officials said one reason they support the bipartisan bill is because it has the best chance of passage this year.

"This bill is not a panacea," said AARP President Marie Smith. "It's a good step in the right direction."

AARP has been criticized by some of its members, lawmakers and advocates for seniors, for supporting the controversial Medicare law last fall, which included a provision essentially banning importing drugs. Some say that support led to the bill's passage. AARP officials have since said they will push to repeal parts of the law, including reimportation.

Last year, the House passed a reimportation bill. In a recent letter to Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist (R-Tenn.), House members urged him to schedule a vote on a Senate version of it before July 4. Frist said the bill should go through the committee process, said spokesman Nick Smith.

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