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OFFICIAL: CANADA DRUG BUYS SAVE KY. MONEY

Lexington retiree Gerry Adams has been buying her prescription medications from Canada for two years. The move, Adams said, saves her money and her doctor doesn't hesitate to write a prescription knowing it will be filled in Canada.

"It's exactly the same medicine. It's packaged in the same containers. I'm not the least worried about contamination or (the pharmacy) sending me the wrong thing," she said.

By purchasing her medications across the country's northern border, Adams is taking part in a national trend that advocates say saves people money.

State Auditor Crit Luallen on Tuesday released a report suggesting that the state could save nearly $37 million on drugs for state employees and $37 million on drugs for Medicaid patients. State employees could save nearly $34 million they'd normally spend on co-pays.

Based on the $1.7 billion Kentuckians spent on prescription drugs in 2001, a study by the Boston University School of Public Health estimated that the state as a whole, including consumers, could save $663 million by importing drugs from other countries.

Reimportation is technically illegal, but the U.S. Food and Drug Administration has not attempted to stop individuals from doing so.

State employees, facing a proposed increase in their health plan costs, love the idea, said Charles Wells, executive director of the Kentucky Association of State Employees.

"Here is an opportunity for the state employees and teachers to save money," Wells said.

But pharmacists see Canadian drug reimportation as a way for them to lose money.

"We will completely destroy the pharmacy business" by purchasing medicines from Canada rather than local pharmacies, said Rosemary Smith, a pharmacist who owns a chain of nine Kentucky drug stores.

While Smith said she's concerned about her customers who can't afford their medicines, she does not think reimportation is the answer. She pointed out that prescription drugs cost more in the U.S. than they
do in Canada because drug manufacturers charge more for them here.

"We all need to get to the root of the problem," she said.

For Emilienne Lopat of Nicholasville, the problem is the cost of the medication in the United States.

Lopat has been buying medicine from Canada for $134 that would cost $222 if she bought it here.

In addition to sending a prescription, she said she filled out a "very detailed" form for the pharmacy, was assigned a doctor to look over the information and "next thing you knew, the package was here."

Still, buying drugs from Canada is not as popular here as in other states. While dozens of storefront businesses selling drugs from Canada have opened in states such as Florida, Kentucky has only had one -- U.S. Canadian Connection in Louisville.

That company, which dropped the word "drug" from its name after receiving pressure from the Kentucky Board of Pharmacy, closed its storefront this spring because it didn't have enough customers.

Dr. Michael Leone found out the hard way that Kentuckians might not be as ready as residents of other states to buy drugs from Canada.

Leone, a retired Lexington podiatrist, has spent more than $1,000 on newspaper advertisements in an effort to find area residents who might be interested in buying drugs from Canada through a New England company.

Under an agreement with the company, Leone will receive $1 for every prescription placed by local people who hear about the company through him.

After nearly a year of putting out brochures at area doctors' offices and retirement homes, he has yet to receive his first dollar.

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