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Prescriptions
• Still priced outrageously

SO FAR, many American efforts to cut the ruinous cost of prescription drugs have made little impact. The gigantic pharmaceutical industry, which showers money on politicians, has stalemated price reforms. Congress actually mandated that Medicare cannot attempt to negotiate lower tabs.

Thanks to Speaker Bob Kiss and the House of Delegates, West Virginia leaped to national leadership in this battle in 2004, shoving through a plan to obtain prescription drugs at low rates available to federal agencies. A Pharmaceutical Cost Management Council was created and a state pharmaceutical advocate was appointed.

But little is happening. The council met in March, but lacked a quorum and could do nothing. It didn’t meet again until July. At the latter session, Gov. Joe Manchin chided the panel: “I want to see some successes as quickly as possible.” He said that cutting prescription costs will be the “highest priority” of his administration.

Tuesday, a national expert who previously advised the Legislature likewise urged quicker action. Dr. Alan Sager of Boston University School of Public Health, along with his co-director, wrote a Gazette commentary prodding the state council and advocate to get moving.

“Americans will spend over $250 billion on prescription drugs this year, one-half of the world’s total,” they wrote. “Yet we’re only 5 percent of the world’s people.”

Sky-high U.S. prices are one cause of the astronomical American cost, they noted. The traumatic prices especially hit West Virginia, which has the nation’s highest rate of oldsters — the group most needing prescriptions.

“West Virginians are second-highest in the nation in the share of their incomes that they pay to drug makers ... and three-fifths above the national level.” Soon, total health expenditures in West Virginia “will exceed one-quarter of the state’s economy,” they added.

All this underscores the urgent need for the Mountain State to move faster in its landmark attempt to reduce prescription costs. Too many West Virginians — and too many medical insurance systems — are being ravaged by outrageous prescription expense. A cost-cutting plan is in place. It’s time to make progress.

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