

US states ponder buying drugs from Canada

Illinois Governor Rod Blagojevich has ordered his staff to study the possibility of buying prescription drugs in Canada, even if that means defying federal drug regulators. The drugs would be used by 240 000 state employees and retirees.

Blagojevich says the state now spends US\$340 million annually on these drugs, 15% more than last year and 17% less than the total expected for next year. He says the status quo is "intolerable and unacceptable."

Blagojevich is not alone in considering the new approach. In Springfield, Mass., Mayor Michael Albano has already enrolled more than 800 city employees in a program that waives their standard copayments if they order their prescription drugs from Canada. He estimates that if a large proportion of Springfield's 9000 employees sign on, it would save the city between US\$4 million and \$9 million per year.

Legislators are looking north for the same reason thousands of consumers are purchasing drugs from Canadian firms — prices for comparable medications are from 20% to 80% less than in the US because Canadian prices are regulated.

However, the US Food and Drug Administration maintains that drug importation of this nature is illegal. Following that lead, the Justice Department has filed suit against chains of store-front operations that have sprung up across the US to process orders for drugs being sent to Canadian pharmacies. The chains have remained open and say they will fight the case in court.

There is strong consumer pressure in the US to allow the imports. The American Association of Retired People says it is a national embarrassment that "in a country with the most advanced medical system in the world, so many of our citizens ... can obtain affordable prescription drugs only by seeking them in foreign countries." — *Milan Korcok, Florida*

Canada shut out at Ig Nobels

Canadian researchers were hanging their heads in collective shame in October after Canada was shut out during the 2003 Ig Nobel Awards at Harvard University. The exclusion was particularly galling because the Biology Prize went to Dutch researchers who recorded "the first scientifically recorded case of homosexual necrophilia in the mallard duck," even though Canada is home to millions of mallards. "It is surprising that there is no Canadian literature on that," agreed Marc Abrahams, editor of the *Annals of Improbable Research* (www.improbable.com), which presents the awards. "Maybe it's more fashionable in Europe?" The Peace Prize went to Lal Bihari of India for "leading an active life even though he has been declared legally dead." The Ig Nobels are presented by genuine Nobel laureates. Nine of this year's 10 winners attended the ceremony, which attracted 1200 people, at their own expense, but Bihari was unable to go because of visa difficulties. The Medicine Prize went to researchers who proved that the brains of London taxi drivers are more highly developed than those of their fellow citizens. — *Patrick Sullivan, CMAJ*

MD critic challenges US over bioterrorism, Iraq

America's public health system is in danger because of its push to prepare for potential bioterrorism attacks, a cofounder of Physicians for Social Responsibility (PSR) has warned Canadian physicians.

In a wide-ranging Oct. 4 address in Toronto sponsored by Physicians for Global Survival (Canada), Dr. Victor Sidel suggested that this emphasis on biological warfare may be misplaced, since these types of attacks have not played a major role in wars or terrorism during the past century.

Sidel, who also traced the evolution of war in the 20th century and condemned US military actions against Iraq, says the new US emphasis on bioterrorism preparedness is diverting resources while public health efforts are severely underfunded and many Americans are dying from preventable infectious diseases and food-borne illnesses.

He said it can also lead to inappropriate immunizations and use of antibiotics — he noted that while Seattle was experiencing its worst outbreak of tuberculosis in 30 years, the federal government was insisting that public health resources be used for smallpox vaccinations.

Sidel, a professor of medicine at the Albert Einstein College of Medicine in New York, says PSR was outspoken in its opposition to the US attack on Iraq, and its advertising campaign featuring the slogan "No to Pre-emptive War" brought both financial and other support.

But "medicine should have spoken out" against the war too, Sidel said after his address.

He said the war's outcome has been disturbingly predictable, and it has become clear that the US is "absolutely unprepared to fulfill its responsibility as an occupying power. International law sets out those responsibilities and the United States has totally failed."

Sidel is also concerned about the growing impact today's wars are having on civilians. For instance, civilian deaths accounted for only 14% of all deaths during WW I, but that proportion rose to 67% in WW II and has averaged 75% to 90% during wars over the past 20 years. Civilians also suffer most because of one of war's leftovers, land mines. Sidel said these are best described as "weapons of slow mass destruction."

Responding to a question, Sidel said he was teaching in Manhattan on the morning of Sept. 11, 2001, and his most vivid memory is the "columns of people walking uptown from downtown. It reminded me of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, people just trying to move away from the risks." — *Ann Silversides, Toronto*



Unprepared to be an occupying power?