A Springfield pharmacist warned of safety problems in securing prescriptions outside of the reach of the FDA.

CHICOPEE - A convenience store owner started faxing prescriptions to Canada last week.

It's to help the uninsured find better prices for drugs, he said.

On his first day, Lonnie Washington said he sent three prescription orders from his Crusty's Variety on Front Street to Canada and supplied information to dozens of people who are seeking price breaks on everything from blood pressure and heart medications to insulin and cholesterol-lowering drugs.

“This is something the community needs and there is a demand for it,” said Washington, a Springfield resident who receives a sales commission on orders to a Canadian company.

He had been researching the idea for months, but said he made a final decision to start the business after hearing about Springfield Mayor Michael J. Albano creating a program which allows city employees and retirees to purchase drugs from Canada.

Following Albano's lead, Chicopee aldermen voted last week to have their mayor look into the same thing.

"If Mayor Albano can do it in Springfield, we should be able to do it ourselves," said Therese D. Dussault of Springfield, who stopped into Washington's store looking for information.

Her husband takes medication for heart disease and diabetes, which costs between $400 and $500 a month.

"Last year between hospitals and doctors and prescriptions we spent $11,999," she said. Everything is going up and our (Social Security) check is not.”

Some pharmaceutical and legal experts question if buying drugs from Canada is a good idea.

“The question of whether it is legal is hard to answer,” said Eric J. Gouvin, a law professor at Western New England College.

The Federal Drug Administration started ignoring the practice in the 1980s when patients brought cancer and AIDS drugs not available in the United States across the border for personal consumption, he said.

Now some legislators are supporting the practice. The U.S. House of Representatives has passed a bill to allow importation of FDA-approved drugs from Canada and several other nations. The measure faces opposition from the Bush administration.

There are also several bills being debated in the Massachusetts Legislature, including one calling for the state to apply for a waiver of the federal law banning the re-importation of drugs.

While no one has ever been prosecuted for buying prescription drugs in Canada, Gouvin said he is unsure how the FDA will react to someone helping people buy drugs.

"If he is chartering the electronic bus, I think he is fine," Gouvin said referring to drug-buying bus trips organized by senior citizens.

Washington said the business done through his store is well within the law since he never touches drugs.

To order drugs, a customer fills out a medical history and a medical release form and Washington faxes or e-mails the information and the prescription to a Canadian company. The customer pays with a credit card or by mailing a money order.

He said the prescription is reviewed by a Canadian doctor, who can contact the patient's doctor in the United States if there are questions. The prescription drugs are shipped to the customer's home.

He said customers cannot receive more than a 90-day supply and no narcotics can be purchased internationally. The process takes about three weeks so most of the drugs purchased are maintenance medications like insulin.
People can save anywhere from 20 to 85 percent in Canada because of the favorable exchange rate and government regulated drug prices. Not all drugs are less-expensive, but in one case Washington said he managed to cut the price of prescriptions for one woman from $3,600 to $2,400 annually.

He said the only cost added to the price of the drugs is a $13 shipping charge.

"I am not a pharmacist. I have no medical background," Washington said. "I'm the link for the American consumer to the Canadian market."

That is the main problem - there is no one to counsel the patient or ensure the drugs are safe, said Nicholas E. Creanza, a pharmacist, spokesman for the Western Massachusetts Pharmacist Association and owner of Campus Pharmacy and Medical Services in Springfield.

"Patient safety is the number one issue because we do not know what other countries are doing," Creanza said. "The U.S. Federal Drug Administration is the gold standard of the world."

If there is a drug recall, it is impossible to warn people who order from Canada. Here patients are alerted personally by a pharmacist and through the media, he said.

There are also concerns about expiration dates, storage and shipping. Some drugs, such as insulin have to be kept refrigerated and patients are unlikely to know if the drug goes bad, he said.

Some drugs are different from country to country. Creanza said he has tried to help overseas visitors who run out of drugs but cannot because they are too different.

Washington is working through Discount Drugs of Canada, a company Earle A. Turow started 18 months ago in his Florida home. Now there are 40 franchises, including eight in New England.

"There has not been one case where there has been a problem," Turow said.

He said prescription drugs are strictly controlled in Canada and many times the drugs are manufactured in the United States. All orders sent to Canada are filled by a distributor and checked by both the distributor and a pharmacist before they are shipped, he said.

He said his operations are legal. Several state governments have attempted to shut down franchises but have failed, he said.

But an FDA spokesman said the agency is cracking down on the purchase of drugs from Canada and has sent warning letters to some distributors. No letter has been sent to Washington or Turow.

"Many people rely on this so they can have a better quality of life," Turow said.

Rita J. Nault of West Springfield said she is considering ordering a prescription through Washington or perhaps on her own through the Internet. She found she can get a 90-day supply of a cholesterol-lowering drug for $150 in Canada. At Costco the same prescription is $350, she said.

"I know I have to pay for prescriptions but some are too expensive," she said. Others she has for a three-month supply are $80 and $90 which are affordable.

Jeanette DeForge can be reached at jdeforge@repub.com

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