

THE REVOLT AGAINST BIG PHARMA

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[Subject: The Revolt Against Big Pharma

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The Revolt Against Big Pharma

By Katrina vanden Heuvel

The Nation

October 8, 2004

In recent months, we've seen a full-scale revolt over the skyrocketing costs of prescription drugs in this country.

Two weeks ago, a high-level dissident executive from Pfizer, the world's largest drugmaker, denounced the pharmaceutical industry for resisting legislation that would allow imports of low-cost prescription drugs from Canada and other countries. Just days later, the City Council of Montgomery County, Maryland, ironically the home of the FDA, added its name to a long list of cities and states that have defied federal law and passed legislation permitting citizens to buy medications in Canada. Moreover, eighteen state attorneys general have written the Bush Administration urging passage of legislation allowing prescription drugs to be imported.

"Stopping good importation bills has a high, high cost not just in money, but in American lives," Dr. Peter Rost, the dissident Pfizer exec, declared at a rally on Capitol Hill in support of legislation that allow imports. "Every day we delay, Americans die

because they cannot afford life-saving drugs."
(Thomas Ryan, the CEO of the drugstore conglomerate CVS, made a similar concession in May.)

In the veep debate, it was good to hear John Edwards blast the Administration for blocking the importation of drugs from Canada and tell Americans—"We're not going to allow it." Sen. John Kerry has talked about prescription drug prices as well, but too often, in this campaign, the importation issue has been shoved under the rug. This, then, is a stealth issue whose time has come. An anti-corporate underground railroad has taken center stage in the legal vacuum, operating in the best tradition of direct action protest. Consumer advocates of all ages are organizing bus trips to Canada where US citizens can purchase cheaper drugs. (Savings run as high as 50 percent; prozac—the popular anti-depressant—costs \$3.34 a pill in the US and \$1.54 a pill in Canada, to cite one example.)

In St. Paul, Minnesota, the protesters are senior citizens who gather in parking lots, where they board buses so they can journey over eight hours to reach Winnipeg. (These trips are funded in part by Sen. Mark Dayton—a millionaire who donates his entire Congressional salary to fund the bus trips.) The trip takes about two days.

This rebellion is being joined by a bipartisan coalition of governors, citizens and state officials who are creating websites linking consumers to Canadian pharmacies. New Hampshire, for instance, includes a link to Canadadrugs.com on its official state website. Even the Republican Governor Craig Benson recommends Canadadrugs.com, which is regulated by the Canadian government. So far, the FDA—faced with a drumbeat of pressure from supporters of importation—has not acted to shut the sites down.

This movement is spreading like wildfire across the country. Just a few days ago, Illinois and Wisconsin launched "I-Saverk"—the nation's first state-sponsored program to help residents buy cheaper prescription drugs from both Europe and Canada. And some 24 states are considering legislation that would permit importation of drugs from Canada or elsewhere, while Connecticut, West Virginia and Vermont are among several states that have already enacted pro-importation laws.

We may be looking at a nationwide insurrection. Currently, one to two million Americans are defying federal law by using the Internet to purchase drugs from Canadian pharmacies. And, according to one Kaiser Family Foundation and Harvard University School of Public Health poll, approximately 80 percent of Americans support importing RX drugs from Canada. Who can blame them? In 2002, Americans paid 67 percent more than Canadians for patented drug products, and medicines will cost US consumers an estimated \$210 billion in 2004. The groundswell is so strong that Health and Human Services Secretary Tommy Thomson conceded in May that Congress will inevitably have to yield.

Much of the blame for the lack of action at the federal level can be pinned on Pharma, the pharmaceutical lobby, which values protecting profits above lives, and which is playing hard-ball in hopes of beating back an importation law. After Rost spoke out, Pfizer launched an investigation into his political activities, which seven members of Congress—including Dan Burton, the Indiana Republican—criticized as "clearly intended to intimidate Dr. Rost."

The Bush Administration and Republican leaders in Congress are also at fault. Recipients of more than \$40 million in drug and insurance industry contributions since 2000, they have refused support for any re-importation proposal. Bush's most recent Medicare package failed to address drug prices and strictly prohibited Medicare from negotiating the lowest, best possible drug prices for Medicare beneficiaries.

Another Republican star recently showed himself to be in the pocket of the drug companies: Arnold Schwarzenegger vetoed several bills which would have allowed importation of drugs from Canada as well as the creation of a website highlighting Canadian pharmacies.

The Republicans have their talking points: Importing medicines from Canada, they argue, will squeeze industry profits and undermine private-sector research and development. But as Marcia Angell, the author of the recently-published "The Truth About the Drug Companies" and former editor-in-chief of the New England Journal of Medicine, has pointed out, the majority of innovation nowadays is coming from the

National Institutes of Health, small biotechnology companies, and taxpayer– funded research in the universities, not from the laboratories of pharmaceutical giants.

Imports, the GOP–Pharma alliance falsely claims, are also hazardous to people's health. Pharma warned Americans "that many such drugs will be unapproved, adulterated, contaminated or counterfeit." The mother of all hypocrites is Senate Majority Leader and medical doctor Bill Frist, who has refused to allow the Senate to vote on re–importation legislation because, as one of his flaks piously put it, 'he won't put the American people in jeopardy."

It's a bogus argument: Both the FDA and the Canadian government oversee much of Canada's prescription drug supply, and "if anything, drugs obtained from Canada are likely to be safer, since they must meet the standards of both countries," said Angell.

Montgomery, Ala., has a program allowing drug re–importations from Canada, and residents have "had absolutely no complaints or problems associated with the program," said John Carnell, the city's risk manager.

While the US Senate under GOP leadership has promised to find the time to vote on a flag–burning Amendment to the Constitution, thousands of senior citizens are forced to choose between buying food and medicine. They suffer, but not in silence.

It doesn't have to be this way. The government could easily take steps to regulate prescription drug prices, including empowering Medicare to leverage its bargaining power to negotiate drug prices AND permitting the re–importation of prescription drugs from Canada. If Republicans in Congress and the White House don't pass such legislation, then senior citizens should rise up and throw Pharma–funded politicians out of office.

The trip to the pharmacy should take ten minutes, not two days.

<http://www.thenation.com/edcut/index.mhtml?bid=7&pid=1889>

End of forwarded message from "Michael Givel" <mgivel@earthlink.net>

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Om Shanti

Hindu Holocaust Museum

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Hindu life, principles, spirituality and philosophy

<http://www.hindu.org>

<http://www.hindunet.org>

The truth about Islam and Muslims

<http://www.flex.com/~jai/satyamevajayate>

The terrorist mission of Jesus stated in the Christian bible:

"Think not that I am come to send peace on earth: I came not so send peace, but a sword.

"For I am come to set a man at variance against his father, and the daughter against her mother, and the daughter in law against her mother in law.

"And a man's foes shall be they of his own household.

– Matthew 10:34–36.

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