

ARE SKY-ROCKETING PRESCRIPTION DRUG PRICES MAKING US EVEN SICKER?



BY KATHLEEN M. O'DONOHUE
CORRESPONDENT

When Cathie Wallace found herself without consistent insurance prescription coverage, she was concerned, but instead of silently accepting the cost explosion of medications, she became an activist. After calling different pharmacies to find the lowest prices for her prescription medications, Wallace discovered significant price differences for identical quantities of the same drug. In July 2001, she tracked the price of her thyroid medication, Levothyroxine, by calling 16 local pharmacies. For one hundred tablets of Levothyroxine, prices ranged from \$11.09 to \$39.99 — a 360 percent cost difference. "Most people don't even think of calling around," Wallace said. "CVS, Rite-Aid, and Walgreens — the closest ones on every corner — are the biggest rip-offs." Currently her favorite place to prescription shop is at Millennium Drugstore in Plymouth, which resides in the back of a party store. Wallace explained that calling 16-18 drugstores to check the prices of six drugs takes about one and a half hours and she advised that one should note who will or won't match prices, and who offers a senior discount.

GOING TO CANADA

Farmington senior citizen Bill Knowles was impacted by rising prescription costs when his \$1,000 drug allowance per year HAP plan was drastically reduced to \$200. In July, Knowles was prescribed the cholesterol-lowering drug Lipitor, and his doctor told him it would be expensive, somewhere between \$1,200 and \$1,300 for a year's worth of the drug if purchased here in the United States. Originally from Canada, Knowles returned there to a suburban Windsor pharmacy to purchase a year's worth of his medication for \$206. Purchasing medications in Canada for over two years now, Knowles described the process as simple. One chooses a pharmacy, brings their U.S. prescription, is quickly evaluated by a Canadian doctor who approves the medication, and the order is promptly filled by a pharmacist. The cost for the physician consultation is around \$25. Knowles advised paying with a credit card to ensure the proper currency exchange rate. "On the whole, it's one helluva savings," he said.

DRIVING UP THE COST

Not only senior citizens or those on fixed incomes are feeling the pinch; single-parent and low-income



JIM JAGFIELD / OBSERVER

Cathie Wallace checks her prescription bills carefully. She has found wide differences in prices.

"Most people don't even think of calling around. CVS, Rite-Aid, and Walgreens — the closest ones on every corner — are the biggest rip-offs."

Cathie Wallace
Activist

families are hit hard as well. Single mother Carol Munoy of Redford has three children with asthma and allergies.

"Treatment is over a hundred dollars a month, and with one income it sometimes comes down to, 'Who's worse this month,'" said Munoy, hoping things will improve in six weeks when new work benefits kick in. Do physicians see patients like Munoy or others who may need to choose whether to buy prescription drugs or groceries?

"Absolutely," said Dr. Michael Maddens, director of the Division of Geriatric Medicine at Royal Oak Beaumont Hospital. "There are clearly folks who are strapped."

Several factors drive up the cost of prescription drugs, according to Maddens.

"Testing (of before-market drugs) is expensive, and the cost of bringing a drug to market is huge. For every one that actually gets to market, there are another hundred that fail along the way," he said.

Since drug companies are for-profit, research is costly. So is what Maddens refers to as "slanted" consumer advertising.

"I spend a great amount of time explaining to patients why they don't need a particular drug that's advertised," said Maddens. "And this certainly adds to the counseling time that's necessary to provide good care," which ultimately raises health care costs in general.

PLEASE SEE PRESCRIPTIONS, C8

Men's bodies change when they get past 40

Men, now that you are past 40, have you noticed that you can't play sports the way you used to? Do your muscles seem smaller? Are you just plain fatigued and feel as if you are turning into a grumpy, old man? The good news is that there is a reason for these changes, as well as ways to regain your energy.

Scott Popyk, a registered pharmacist at Health Dimensions in Farmington Hills, works with physicians to help men regain their energy. He explains what happens to men as they get older.

"As men age, testosterone levels drop. This manifests as a variety of symptoms including loss of muscle mass, depression, reduced libido, heart disease, and abdominal weight gain. The American medical community is just beginning to recognize the important role of testosterone in the aging male."

"These symptoms are sometimes called 'andropause,' the male counterpart to menopause."

CAUSES OF LOW TESTOSTERONE

Dr. William McDougall, a Farmington Hills board-certified internist, who also trained in biochemistry, explains that testosterone decline begins in the 40s. A man of that age may notice a slight decrease in his memory or his ability to play sports. By the time he is

SIGNS OF LOW TESTOSTERONE

- Low energy and endurance
 - Mood swings
 - Decrease in lean muscle
 - Increase in body fat, especially in the abdomen
 - Decreased libido
 - Depression
 - Deterioration in memory or work performance
 - Increased irritability
 - Loss of bone density
- Source: WebMD, <http://my.webmd.com>

60, he attributes his fatigue, loss of muscle mass, and decreased libido to aging, rather than to an underlying decline in testosterone.

Many factors cause testosterone to decline including prolonged stress, high blood pressure, diabetes, trauma to the testicles, radiation or chemotherapy damage, long-term exposure to heavy metals in industrial settings and in air pollution, and regular contact with

chemicals including PCBs, pesticides, workplace chemicals, auto exhaust, lawn chemicals, secondhand smoke, and environmental toxins.

According to Dr. McDougall, men's lifestyle choices can cause testosterone decline in the following ways.

Obesity. "When a man is overweight, his excess fat produces too much estrogen. It also results in the conversion of existing testosterone into estradiol (a form of estrogen) — often manifested in feminizing of the body, including growth of breast tissue and reduction in facial hair."

Cigarette smoking. "More than 10 cigarettes a day reduces blood levels of testosterone."

Alcohol consumption. "Drinking alcohol increases the conversion of testosterone to estrogen. Obviously the more alcohol you ingest, the greater effect on testosterone."

WAYS TO RESTORE TESTOSTERONE

Find the cause. If a man notices signs of testosterone decline, he can take this article to his physician. Dr. McDougall says to ask for several blood tests: sex-hormone binding globulin (SHBG), total testosterone, free

PLEASE SEE TESTOSTERONE, C7

Rx Briefs

Natural HRT

Health Dimensions Compounding Pharmacy will offer three seminars on natural (bio-identical) hormone replacement therapy and wellness information for women and men:

■ Facts That Heal, Facts That Kill presented by Dr. R. Ng, of the Center for Holistic Medicine, Wednesday, Oct. 23.

■ HRT: Natural vs. Synthetic presented by Dr. J. Nussbaum, of the Center for Holistic Medicine, Wednesday, Oct. 30.

■ Testosterone: A Man's Best Friend presented by Dr. W. McDougall, of Complement Healthcare, Wednesday, Nov. 6. All seminars held from 7-9 p.m. The cost is \$15 per seminar or two seminars for \$25. Space is limited. Call (248) 489-1573. Health Dimensions is located at 32905 Hamilton Ct., G200, Farmington Hills.

Pedicure for cure

Nail technicians at Lasting Impressions Salon of Garden City want to do their share to fight breast cancer. Since October is Breast Cancer Awareness Month, the technicians will offer the "Pedicure for Life."

A customer's legs are bathed in sparkling juice or champagne, exfoliated with a borries and cream smoothie mask, then rinsed and topped off with the toe nails painted in...what else?...pink! The cost is \$45 with \$5 going to the Breast Cancer Research Foundation. Manager Ruth Wilson will donate another \$5. Patrons can also have a pink ribbon airbrushed on their nails for \$2. The salon is located at 28244 Ford Road. For an appointment, call (734) 421-4473. Hours are 10 a.m. to 7 p.m. Friday, and 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. Saturday.

Power wheelchairs

Miracle on Wheels makes available power (electric) wheelchairs to non-ambulatory senior citizens 65 years and older usually at no out-of-pocket expense if they qualify. The electric wheelchairs are provided to those who cannot walk or self-propel a manual wheelchair in their home or independent living quarters. The service may also be available to the permanently disabled of any age.

Call (800) 749-8778 or visit www.durablemedical.com for more information.

Team Diabetes

It's not too early to think about signing up with Team Diabetes for the 10th Annual Kunitake Farms Nona Marathon in Nona, Hawaii, Sunday, June 22, 2003. Please contact the American Diabetes Association at (888) 342-2383 to learn about upcoming informational meeting dates, group training sessions and clinics.

Cold or flu?

Saint Joseph Mercy Senior Health Services will present a Senior Health Day 8:30-11:30 a.m. Tuesday, Nov. 5, at the S.J.M. Health Stop, located in Briarwood Mall just off I-94 at the State Street exit in Ann Arbor.

Is it a Cold or the Flu?

What to Know and Do will feature Dr. Alan Dengiz, medical director, S.J.M. Senior Health Services. Learn about flu symptoms, treatments for a cold, minimizing your risks of getting sick, when to call the doctor and the effectiveness of homeopathic remedies. Flu shots will be given on a first come, first served basis beginning at 8:30 a.m. There also will be samples of healthy food and door prizes. Call (734) 827-3777.