

Prescription Drug Importation



What is Prescription Drug Importation?

Prescription drugs are often less expensive in other countries. This is due to a variety of factors including few, if any, other countries' health systems are as fragmented as the United States. In many other countries the government may be the only purchaser of prescription drugs and cost controls are more stringent. There have been efforts at the state and federal level to permit the Secretary of Health and Human Services (and/or the state) to allow individuals to purchase lower cost prescription drugs from other countries and import these products into the United States for personal use.

Proponents of importation believe that allowing Americans to purchase prescription drugs from pharmacies in other countries is a way for consumers to take advantage of lower prices offered in those countries. Proponents argue that since prescription drugs are manufactured all over the world, consumers in the U.S. should be able to take advantage of this worldwide marketplace.

Opponents express concern that an importation program increases safety concerns because it would allow prescription drugs to enter the U.S. supply chain without guarantees of safety and efficacy. Opponents also believe allowing importation will not yield significant savings because of the regulatory process that will need to be established to ensure the safety of the prescription drugs.

How Would Importation Work?

Some state efforts have sought to allow state health plans (like the state employees' health plan or the state prison health plan) to purchase prescription drugs in bulk for the populations served by the plan. Federal proposals would allow consumers to purchase prescription drugs directly from approved foreign pharmacies and would also allow certain U.S. pharmacies or wholesalers to purchase drugs from foreign approved pharmacies.

ACS CAN Position

ACS CAN is concerned that current proposals do not include robust safeguards to ensure the safety of the prescription drugs imported into the U.S. Many oncology drugs require specific handling which may not be able to be guaranteed through an importation program. Moreover, some have suggested that establishing a program to provide for prescription drug importation would negate savings provided under the importation program.