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Canada trips highlight absurd U.S. drug prices

In my view, there is probably no issue that the people of Vermont feel more strongly about than the need to address the crisis of outrageously high prescription drug costs. Unfortunately, the Free Press (editorial, Feb. 7) appears to lack the sense of urgency that most Vermonters feel about this issue.

I disagree when the Free Press suggests the United States cannot afford to provide a comprehensive prescription drug benefit under Medicare. I disagree when the Free Press implies that half-measures will effectively address one of the most serious health care crises in America today. I disagree when the Free Press contends that individuals going to Canada to get prescription drugs for their personal use are breaking the law. Needless to say, I would not participate in trips to Canada to purchase prescription drugs if the U.S. Customs Service didn't allow them.

Everywhere I go around Vermont people tell me how absurd it is that the same prescription



Bernie Sanders

IT'S MY TURN

drugs manufactured by the same American companies, are sold at far lower prices in Canada and in virtually every other country on Earth. Meanwhile, the pharmaceutical industry is consistently one of the most profitable in the country, and in 1998 saw a 26 percent increase in profits for its 10 largest companies. Further, this industry continues to rip off the American people despite the fact that U.S. taxpayers are providing them with billions of dollars a year in tax breaks via publicly funded research.

When prescription drugs can mean the difference between life and death or constant pain vs. a normal life, there is no moral ex-

cuse for millions of people in this country to be gouged by an industry far more concerned with profits than the well-being of people.

Legislation I have introduced in Congress, which now has 57 Democratic and Republican cosponsors, would go a long way to lowering the costs of prescription drugs in this country. This bill would allow prescription drug distributors and pharmacists to import lower-priced drugs from Canada and other countries so long as these products conform to strict FDA standards. My legislation is supported by the Community Pharmacists of America precisely because they no longer want to pay two or three times more for the same product than do pharmacists in Canada, Mexico and elsewhere.

The Free Press is right in stating that a Medicare prescription drug benefit "would cost billions." Can we, the richest nation on the Earth, afford it? Is the United States capable of doing for its seniors and chronically ill what virtually every other industrialized country is doing? Yes,

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we can if we get our priorities straight. We do not need, as a nation, to spend \$125 billion a year on corporate welfare. We do not need to continue giving billions of dollars in tax breaks to the wealthiest people and largest corporations. We do not need to spend huge sums of money on wasteful and duplicative military weapon systems. But we do need to make certain that the elderly and the sick are able to get the prescription drugs they need at a cost they can afford.

In terms of trips to Canada for prescription drugs, let me explain why I took a group of women who are courageously battling breast cancer over the border in July and why I will be accompanying a busload of seniors to-

day. These trips accomplish two objectives. First, they are of real help to some Vermonters who are having difficulty paying the high cost of prescription drugs they need. The women who went with me in July, for example, were able to purchase tamoxifen, the widely prescribed drug for breast cancer, for less than 10 percent of what they paid in Vermont.

Secondly, the trip across the border highlights the absurdity of a situation in which the same drug sold in Germany for 71 cents, Sweden for 68 cents, the United Kingdom for 65 cents, Canada for 64 cents, France for 57 cents and Italy for 51 cents is sold in the U.S. for one dollar. It is my intention to do everything I can to continue focusing attention on this situation so Congress will fi-

nally be forced to stand up to the pharmaceutical industry and pass serious legislation protecting American health care consumers.

The Free Press states that trips across the border to purchase prescription drugs are illegal. In recent years, thousands of Americans have gone into both Canada and Mexico for that purpose. I have talked with the U.S. Customs Service, which is charged with enforcing federal laws in this area, and they have made it very clear that a person may import a three-month supply of FDA approved prescription drugs for his or her own use.

My hope is that all of us, including the Free Press, will work together so Americans do not have to leave their country to buy the prescription drugs they need. We need legislation now that ends the second-class status of American prescription drug consumers, and makes certain that all people in this country are able to get the medicine they need at a price that is fair and affordable.

Bernie Sanders is Vermont's independent representative in Congress.