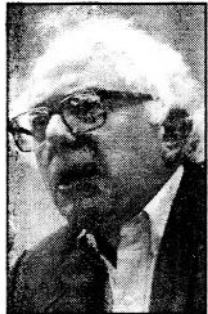


# Costliness Of Prescription Drugs A Major Health Issue

BY BERNARD SANDERS

**T**he more I study the issue, the more I believe that the high cost of prescription drugs is one of the major health care crises facing our country. My feelings on this issue have grown stronger as a result of some very powerful and poignant testimony that I heard at a well-attended town meeting which my office recently held in Montpelier.



Sanders

What are some of the facts? The cost of prescription drugs is soaring, and is rising much faster than the general rate of inflation. In the last year, drug prices have risen three times

as fast as other goods consumers use. The pharmaceutical industry has been, for many years, one of the most profitable industries in the United States. Last year, the top five drug companies saw an average 29 percent increase in their profits and enjoyed an average of \$3 billion in profits.

According to the non-partisan Center for Responsive Politics, the pharmaceutical industry spends more money than any other industry in lobbying the government and in campaign contributions. They are a very political and powerful industry. During the last election cycle, pharmaceutical companies spent \$85 million in trying to influence government to protect their interests.

The same drugs manufactured by American pharmaceutical companies are sold in Canada, Mexico and other countries for far lower prices than in the United States. Thousands of Americans (including many Vermonters) are now heading north or south of the border in order to get a significant reduction in the cost of their prescription drugs. A recent study that

I requested shows that Vermont senior citizens are paying 81 percent more for 10 widely used drugs than are seniors in Canada.

The pharmaceutical industry receives a massive amount of taxpayer support with almost no accountability. The National Institutes of Health (NIH) spends more than \$1 billion a year of our tax dollars for drug research and development. When a new drug is discovered by the NIH or an NIH research project, the product is given over to a drug company for sale and distribution. The company then charges any price it wants for the taxpayer-developed product.

As a result of NIH research, it was determined that Johnson & Johnson's Lavamisole, an anti-worm drug for sheep and horses, could also treat colon cancer in humans. With that new research, developed by taxpayer dollars, Johnson & Johnson began charging \$6 per pill to treat colon cancer in people, 100 times what they had been charging for the same product when they sold it to treat sheep and horses.

The pharmaceutical industry

engages in major price discrimination. Those large entities which can purchase huge quantities of drugs, such as hospitals, HMO's insurance companies, government agencies and mail order companies, are able to pay significantly lower prices than the drug

Millions of Americans are simply unable to afford the medications that their doctors are prescribing. As a result, they are unnecessarily suffering and, in some cases, dying. It also means that many others are "self-prescribing," taking medicine less fre-

quently than they should or in half-dosages – a process which can exacerbate health problems. The high cost of drugs also means that many Americans are being forced to spend more of their limited budgets than they can really afford. I have talked to many Vermont seniors, for example, who are having to make the impossible choice among buying the food they need, keeping their homes warm or purchasing

---

*The high cost of prescription drugs is causing major health care problems. Millions of Americans are simply unable to afford the medications that their doctors are prescribing.*

---

stores from which millions of Americans buy their medications. The result is far higher costs for drug store consumers. Amazingly, even different government agencies (Medicaid, Medicare, Veterans Administration, Department of Defense) are charged widely different prices for the same drug.

The high cost of prescription drugs is causing major health care problems.

quently than they should or in half-dosages – a process which can exacerbate health problems. The high cost of drugs also means that many Americans are being forced to spend more of their limited budgets than they can really afford. I have talked to many Vermont seniors, for example, who are having to make the impossible choice among buying the food they need, keeping their homes warm or purchasing

their medications. Further, when people in need of medication are unable to afford to afford their prescription drugs, they often end up in the hospital or in emergency care – at huge expense to the government, insurance companies and hospitals. The high cost of prescription drugs is serious business – in some cases a matter of life and death. The Congress has done a very poor job in protecting American consumers against the greed of the very powerful pharmaceutical industry. I want Vermonters to know that I am working hard on a number of pieces of legislation which, if enacted, would significantly reduce the price of prescription drugs as well as greatly increase their accessibility. While we continue to fight for a national health care program which guarantees health care for all, we must make certain that no American goes without the prescription drugs they need to protect their health.

*Bernard Sanders, I-Vt., is Vermont's congressman.*