

# Americans head for borders to get cheaper medications

By WILSON RING  
The Associated Press

**MONTREAL** — Elisa Jaring has been fighting breast cancer for almost three years, relying largely on prescription drugs she buys in Canada for a fraction of what she would pay in the United States.

Until this year, the 40-year-old mother of four saved almost \$1,000 annually by going to a pharmacy in Hemmingford, Quebec, a 30-minute drive from her home in Swanton, Vt.

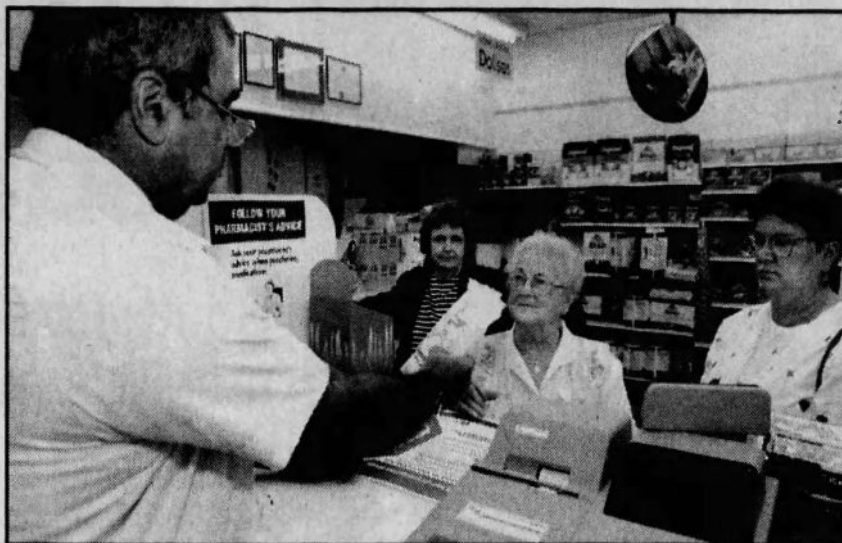
Then the pharmacist told her she needed to start bringing prescriptions from a Canadian doctor for insurance purposes. Now she is in a bind.

The cost of prescription drugs has become a political rallying cry across the United States, particularly where Americans can slip across to Mexico or Canada to take advantage of lower prices. Some U.S. officials are looking for ways to make it easier for Americans to lower their pharmaceutical bills.

Many countries control drug prices. Drug makers say they sell their products for higher prices in the United States in part to support the costs of developing new drugs.

After all, U.S. law allows individual Americans to buy prescriptions abroad as long as the drugs are prescribed by a U.S. doctor, intended for personal use and transported in the original container. U.S. distributors are barred from doing the same thing.

The manufacturers say consumer protections would be threatened if



By CRAIG LINE, The Associated Press

**CHEAPER MEDICATION:** Canadian pharmacist Kevork Ohanian gives Mary Salls her filled drug prescription at his pharmacy in Montreal. Ms. Salls, 81, of St. Albans, Vt., travels to Canada to get her medication filled because the drugs are cheaper there than they are in the United States.

Congress drops the prohibition — as proposed by Independent Rep. Bernard Sanders of Vermont — because unsuspecting customers might end up with drugs not approved by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration.

Still, consumers are eager for a better deal.

To prove it, Rep. Sanders organized a trip to a Montreal doctor for Ms. Jaring and four other women. Each had a brief consultation with Dr. Nii Quao at his office, then had their newly minted prescriptions filled at a nearby pharmacy.

"It cost me \$57 (\$38.75 in U.S. cur-

rency)," said Ms. Jaring, who was diagnosed with two types of breast cancer in 1996 and 1997. "In the States, it would have cost me \$189."

Ms. Jaring, however, still faces the problem posed by her Canadian pharmacist's demand for a Canadian-authorized prescription. For now, she will keep going to her Vermont physician.

"There is too much history to change doctors," she said.

On the Mexican border, where pharmacies accept prescriptions from U.S. physicians, more and more Americans are traveling south for less expensive drugs. It is not as common

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ELISA JARING, breast cancer victim who goes to Canada to get her drug prescriptions filled

in Canada.

Larry Labor, vice president of professional services at the North Country Hospital in the Vermont border community of Newport, said there are plenty of residents who go to Canada to get prescription drugs — despite the hassle of finding a Canadian doctor.

"You've got to go sit (in a doctor's office) and wait for a signature. He's not going to do that pro bono," he said.

It is much cheaper, though. A study by the House Government Reform and Oversight Committee staff found that of the 10 most widely used drugs by senior citizens, Americans pay 81% more than Canadians do.

"It's the same product, often manufactured in the same factory, and put in the same bottles," Rep. Sanders said.