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State questions drug program

Butler County promoting Canadian imports

By Steve Kemme
The Cincinnati Enquirer

HAMILTON - The Ohio Attorney General's Office says Butler County has ventured into a legally questionable area by promoting a Canadian prescription drug discount program.

The county contracted with a private company, Prescription Relief in Marion, Ohio, to provide a program that will give low-income people who are not on Medicaid access to prescription drugs at a small charge.

The county also is promoting in its pamphlets and Web site three other programs offered by the company. One of them is the Canadian discount drug program.

Federal law prohibits the importation of drugs except for those needed for life-threatening illnesses that are not available in the U.S., and state law prohibits importing prescription drugs by unlicensed pharmacies.

"None of the pharmacies in Canada are licensed in the state of Ohio," said Mark Gribben, spokesman for the Ohio Attorney General's Office. "It's our position that it's probably not good public policy for elected officials to be promoting activities that are illegal under state and federal law."

The county's promotion of the Canadian drug program, which charges a \$25 set-up fee, also has drawn the ire of pharmacists, who say that it will hurt local pharmacies financially and will expose consumers to health risks from drug supplies not monitored by American or Canadian drug regulatory agencies.

The pharmacists' objections angered Commissioner Mike Fox, who instigated the county's creation of the discount drug program for low-income people.

"It's just a heartless act of greed," Fox said. "We are simply trying to make Butler County residents aware that there are alternatives and there are ways they can get prescription medications for significantly less than they're paying over the counter."

He said the county will stop promoting the Canadian program if necessary. The commissioners will ask the county prosecutor's office a legal opinion.

By buying prescription drugs received in the mail from Canada, people run a high risk of taking drugs that are ineffective or harmful, said Debbie Lange, president of the Ohio Pharmacists Association and the Butler County Pharmacists Association.

"A lot of the drugs imported from Canada come from China and Bangladesh, where 50 percent of the drug supply is counterfeit," said Lange, who works for Target stores in Cincinnati and Dayton.

Local pharmacists also are upset because the Canadian discount drug program takes revenue from them.

"They're using taxpayers' money to promote businesses outside the county," said Christina Weisenberger, owner of Mills Pharmacy in Fairfield.

Drug manufacturers, not pharmacists, are responsible for the high cost of prescription drugs, she said.

William Winsley, executive director of the Ohio State Board of Pharmacy, sent a letter this past week to the commissioners criticizing them for promoting the Canadian drug program.

"While we understand that patients may feel the need to obtain drugs from Canada," he wrote, "I would suggest to you that it is highly inappropriate for any public official to actively encourage people to break the law."

Butler County is using \$100,000 in federal Community Development Block Grant funding so that low-income residents can have access to the Prescription Relief program.

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