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AMA may back importing drugs

Largest U.S. doctors group is having its annual winter meetings.

By BRUCE JAPSEN

Knight Ridder Newspapers

ATLANTA — The American Medical Association is weighing support of importing prescription drugs from outside the United States as the nation's physicians address pleas from patients over the high cost of medicines.

The largest U.S. doctors group, representing a quarter million physicians, is being asked by members to put its considerable lobbying clout behind federal legislation that would find a way to safely import drugs from outside the United States.

Already, several states have bucked the U.S. Food and Drug Administration policy against importation and set up state-sponsored initiatives to purchase lower-cost drugs from Canada or elsewhere. The issue is expected to come before Congress early next year and could gain momentum should the AMA's 545-member policy-making House of Delegates back some form of importation.

"We owe it to our patients to advocate for safe importation of drugs," Stephanie Stanton, a voting AMA delegate and medical student from the University of Minnesota, said at Sunday's meeting of the House of Delegates. "This is all because of our patients, and it is driven by our patients."

The nation's tab for prescription drugs continues to rise 10 to 15 percent a year by most estimates, and an increasing number of patients seek relief by buying drugs from Canada and other countries where prices can be 20 to 80 percent cheaper.

Because various resolutions supporting safe importation have the support of large state delegations, including the California Medical Association, a measure putting the AMA on record in support of importation is seen as having a good chance to pass.

AMA delegates could vote on an importation measure by Tuesday, the last day of this week's annual winter meeting.

The potential of the AMA taking a stance in favor of importation has the pharmaceutical industry so



concerned that key members of its powerful Washington lobbying organization, as well as drug company hired lobbying firms, are in Atlanta in an effort to derail the measure.

A representative from a consulting firm headed by former New York Mayor Rudolph Giuliani warned doctors at a meeting Sunday of potential safety risks from imported prescriptions. "Non-FDA approved medicines are already getting into our system," said Maureen Casey, an attorney with security consulting firm Giuliani Partners, a paid consultant to several drug companies. She appeared at Sunday's AMA meeting on the drug industry's behalf.

But some delegates said safety issues, particularly from unregulated Internet pharmacies, are all the more reason why the AMA should back importation and encourage Congress to pass laws ensuring safety of drugs from outside the United States.

"Drug costs are so cumbersome to patients that they are going to Internet sites, and we believe that the FDA with newer technologies can support safe importation," said Paul Matson, an orthopedic surgeon from Mankato, Minn.

One solution to safe importation suggested by the AMA's board of trustees would be to ask the FDA to adopt electronic tracking technology for imported prescription drugs. Some doctors believe that could be easily mandated by the FDA, since many drugs made in the United States are sold overseas and sometimes re-imported back into this country.

The AMA has deferred making an official stance on importation, but several members said Sunday they supported the just-released AMA board report that would urge federal legislation to make importation a reality if safety could be assured.

The AMA's deliberations come as a Department of Health and Human Services task force finalizes its recommendations on importation.

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