

## **Bipartisan senate team unveils drug import bill**

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By Joanne Kenen

WASHINGTON (Reuters) - Leading U.S. senators on Wednesday unveiled a bipartisan bill that would let Americans import cheaper U.S.-approved prescription drugs from abroad.

Individuals would be able to purchase 90-day supplies of medicines for personal use from qualified Canadian pharmacies. Larger commercial shipments to wholesalers or pharmacies would be limited to Canada for the first year and then expand to approved industrialized nations, including European Union members, Australia, New Zealand, Japan and Switzerland.

"We pay here in the United States the highest prices for prescription drugs in the world. That's not fair," said Sen. Byron Dorgan, a North Dakota Democrat.

Dorgan and other bill authors expect increased foreign competition to drive down U.S. prices.

With politicians hearing constituent complaints about high drug costs, the idea of easing import restrictions has been gaining strength among Republicans and Democrats despite strong opposition from the pharmaceutical industry. Some state and local governments have also considered purchasing Canadian drugs to save money.

The U.S. House of Representatives last year easily passed a drug import bill despite the opposition of Republican leaders, and support appears to be building in the U.S. Senate.

"This has a lot of horsepower and a lot of firepower behind it," said co-sponsor Sen. Edward Kennedy, a Massachusetts Democrat. Kennedy said about one-fourth of the prescription drugs in the United States are already imported.

Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist, a Tennessee Republican, promised backers of drug imports a measure would be considered this year but that does not guarantee a vote.

Senate health committee Chairman Judd Gregg, a New Hampshire Republican, plans hearings in early May and will soon introduce his own legislation "that allows drugs to be imported without compromising safety" from Canada and certain other industrialized countries, a spokeswoman said.

Frist has not endorsed legislation and has voiced safety concerns about drug imports. But a number of prominent Republicans are co-sponsors of the Dorgan bill, including John McCain of Arizona, Trent Lott of Mississippi and Olympia Snowe of Maine.

Democratic sponsors include Minority Leader Tom Daschle of South Dakota.

Drug makers, who are big campaign contributors, oppose importation of lower-priced medicines.

William Hubbard, a Food and Drug Administration associate commissioner, said in an interview that supporters of imports are "creating essentially a dual standard" where U.S.-made drugs meet the FDA's "gold standard," while cheaper foreign drugs may not.

Authors of the legislation say they have included ample regulation to insure safety, and a 1 percent surcharge or user fee to cover the cost of additional inspections. Only FDA-approved drugs could be imported, and they must meet U.S. labeling requirements.

The legislation also would allow penalties for unfair trade practices if a drug maker tries to block imports. (Additional reporting by Susan Heavey)

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