

DRUG LIFELINE RUNS NORTH

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Abstract (Abstract): This spring, solitary journeys like [Randy] Boardman's began to take on the look of a movement: From a senior center in Burlington, 30 Vermonters climbed onto a chartered bus and were served doughnuts by a congressman, independent US Representative Bernie Sanders of Burlington. Today, Sanders will take his support to a new level, launching an Internet campaign advertising bargains to be had in Canada. Three Vermont senior centers are organizing regular bus trips, as are groups in Montana, Maine, Minnesota, North Dakota, and Michigan.

The senior New Englanders taking their business north of the 45th parallel would not describe themselves as radical. But from the standpoint of Washington, the trips are part of a rumbling message of protest. Politicians like Sanders - who says the issue arouses more anger than any he has encountered in his political career - hope to embarrass the US Congress into controlling prices on prescription drugs for seniors.

As pressure to lessen the burden of drug prices on senior citizens - who make up 12 percent of the US population, yet shell out 30 percent of drug expenditures - has built to a high pitch in Washington, few politicians have more relentlessly targeted the pharmaceutical companies than Sanders. He has sponsored legislation that would allow pharmacists in the United States to reimport medicines from their counterparts in Canada, dramatically forcing prices down by integrating the country's markets. Canadian retail prices are 30 percent to 80 percent lower because Canada offers universal health care, so the state purchasing agent has more power than individual HMOs to demand lower prices, said David Sirota, a Sanders spokesman.

Full text: NORTHFIELD, Vt. - Three years ago, with an address written down on a slip of paper, 65-year-old Randy Boardman drove out of the hills and 120 miles north into Canada to buy the tiny pink pills his doctor had prescribed.

The next year, he took his skeptical friend Doug, whose derision had given way to desperation under the pressure of his out-of-pocket yearly drug bill of \$4,500. By that evening, when they crossed back across the border, Canada's price controls had saved them \$1,260.

This spring, solitary journeys like Boardman's began to take on the look of a movement: From a senior center in Burlington, 30 Vermonters climbed onto a chartered bus and were served doughnuts by a congressman, independent US Representative Bernie Sanders of Burlington. Today, Sanders will take his support to a new level, launching an Internet campaign advertising bargains to be had in Canada. Three Vermont senior centers are organizing regular bus trips, as are groups in Montana, Maine, Minnesota, North Dakota, and Michigan.

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And the powerful pharmaceutical industry has responded by blitzing the border states with a dire warning: Price controls would drastically slow drug research and usher in the worst flaws of socialized medicine. The real medical exodus runs southward, the advertisements argue, with hundreds of thousands of Canadians crossing the border every year for superior treatment in American hospitals.

For 64-year-old Maurice Brown, who has voted Republican all his life and signed up for "Bernie's bus," politics hardly seems relevant: He would back any politician who promised to tackle drug prices. Brown's alternative cost-cutting strategy is to stop taking all four of his heart and respiratory prescriptions toward the end of the year, when the \$2,500 allotted by his health insurer runs out, and staying away from dangerous activity, like

shoveling his driveway, until Jan. 1.

"These are not rabble-rousing people," said Chip Castle, director of the Central Vermont Senior Center. "I think in some ways they feel they're betraying their own doctor. It's pretty weird at this point in their lives they have to hop on a bus and go to Montreal to buy pills."

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A few weeks ago, the pharmaceutical companies - which support resolving the problem by increasing Medicare coverage - began fighting back with TV and radio advertisements making the case that the US health care system is far preferable to the Canadian one. At risk, if Sanders succeeds, is America's top-flight research and development, the best possible medication, and access to life-saving cancer treatments, argue the advertisements and a Web site, www.busfromcanada.com.

"You can't just cherry-pick what you want when it's part and parcel of a whole system," said Tim Ryan, executive director of Citizens for Better Medicare. "You have to understand the downside of government controls of these prices."

On the red-brick main street of a border town like Bedford, Quebec, comparing the two health care systems is a matter of everyday commerce, especially when the exchange rate is particularly favorable: Americans show up to get their cavities filled, or buy dentures, or - more and more often - walk into Jacques Bouchard's pharmacy with a brand-new prescription from a Canadian doctor, which they need in order to buy the drugs.

On the other hand, one of Bouchard's relatives, who has breast cancer, was just referred to a hospital in Burlington for radiation treatments, because the wait in Montreal would be too long. All things considered, Bouchard said, shrugging, both the American and Canadian health care systems have their flaws.

But proponents of drug price control said comparing our system with Canada's is missing the point, and call the industry's campaign a scare tactic. Per capita health care spending in Canada is half what it is in the United States, and that explains scarcity and long waits, said Alan Sager, a Boston University professor who has testified before Congress in support of price controls. In fact, Sager said, if Americans could afford medications, it would shrink hospital deficits, because they would better regulate their own conditions.

Sanders has responded to the advertisements with his own Web site, bernie.house.gov/bustocanada, which lists the price of prescription drugs in the United States and Canada, based on his own comparative shopping visits north.

"What the pharmaceutical industry is doing is a vulgar way to deflect attention from the real issue," Sanders said. "The debate about the Canadian and American health care systems is a very interesting issue, but that is not what this is about."

More important, says Sanders, are the dangerous medical decisions seniors are making under pressure. Castle said that, in one case that came up at the Central Vermont Council on Aging, a couple did it this way: The wife took her prescription for one month, and then the husband took his prescription for one month. There were similar stories on Sanders' bus:

Phil and Phyllis Atwood, who live in South Burlington and are both 70, can't quit their jobs; Lucille Danyow of St. Albans, who is 78, slices her pills in half so her supply will last longer. And Maurice Brown just stops taking his medications, and hopes for the best.

Stories like these eat at Boardman, a retired bulldozer operator who drinks out of a "Good Morning, Grumpy" mug and routinely refers to his sister-in-law as "General Patton." When Boardman retired seven years ago, he

had never taken a pill except aspirin. It came as a surprise to discover he needed to spend \$1,241 every year to lower his cholesterol. He'll make the drive, but it doesn't sit right with him.

"Here, this nation, as rich as it is," he said. "Why should I have to leave it to buy medicine?"

Illustration

Caption: Randy Boardman of Northfield, Vt., buys his prescription drugs at lower prices in Canada. / GLOBE STAFF PHOTO/MARK WILSON

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