

Ottawa looking at allowing prescription drug ads

From Canadian Press

OTTAWA (CP) — Drug companies could be allowed to advertise prescription medicines directly to the public under one of several options being studied by Health Canada.

Critics of "direct-to-consumer" drug advertising are upset the idea is even being considered, saying such advertising would play on people's fear of illness and death to promote sales.

Currently, Canada allows advertising of non-prescription drugs while advertising for prescription drugs is tightly restricted. However, U.S. drug advertising reaches Canada via magazines, television and the Internet.

A Health Canada document prepared for public consultations on new food and drug legislation says the existing regulations "are not well adapted to deal with modern reality."

One option put forward for consideration is that a drug ad would require pre-clearance by Health Canada or an independent body.

Mario Simard, a senior Health Canada official, denied that the department is proposing to relax regulations on drug advertising, but added that it is open to argument.

"We want to have a discussion with the general public, with the interested parties," he said.

"If somebody puts it (direct-to-consumer advertising) on the table, and if it's discussed, and if people agree there should be some leeway, we'll listen to that. But that's not what we are putting on the table."

However, the consultation document sets out fairly detailed suggestions for regulating direct-to-consumer advertising.

"For example, it could be required that any proposed promotion of a health product be subject to pre-clearance by Health Canada," says the document.

"Another way to proceed would be to require that Health Canada be notified beforehand of any new proposed promotion and the department would have so many days to object."

Sunil Patel, president of the Canadian Medical Association, said Canadians want more information about drugs, and the current regulations should be changed.

"Direct-to-consumer information is the way to go," he said. "It would have to be evidence-based and it would have to be in a language Canadians can understand, not a 30-second jingle that is designed just to promote a specific product."

Patel said such advertising would have to be cleared by Health Canada, and peer-reviewed by physicians and appropriate scientists.

But Mike McBane of the Canadian Health Coalition said no advertising of prescription medicine should be allowed.

"Drug advertising is meant to sell drugs. It's going to put huge pressure on drug plans."

"Health Canada's proposal is being pushed by the ad agencies and drug companies. It's not about information, it's about marketing products."

U.S. studies have shown that doctors frequently prescribe medication requested by patients.

Simard said there is no deadline for completing the consultations, and noted that Health Minister Anne McLellan has expressed serious reservations about drug advertising.