

OPA, CPhA lead demand for Ottawa to ban drug exports

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WINNIPEG (CP) — A coalition of pharmacists and patient advocates wants the federal government to ban prescription drug exports to the United States in a bid to get ahead of any renewed efforts by the new U.S. Congress to legalize the trade.

In a letter to Health Minister Tony Clement, the group says the issue is urgent because some senior U.S. Democrats have said legalizing imports from Canada will be a priority when the next congressional session begins in February.

“We represent Canadian pharmacists, members of the supply chain and patients who believe that the government should institute an immediate, simple and straightforward ban on the export, both bulk and retail, of prescription drugs produced for Canadians,” states the letter sent Wednesday.

The letter is signed by the Canadian Pharmacists Association, the Ontario Pharmacists Association, the Best Medicines Coalition and the Canadian Association for Pharmacy Distribution Management.

The groups ask Clement to meet with them in the next two weeks.

Canadian patients could face widespread drug shortages if Congress legalizes imports, says a spokesperson for the Canadian Pharmacists Association.

Depending on its wording, legislation that is passed could pave the way for large U.S. chains to start filling prescriptions with Canadian drugs and allow governments to look north to subsidize their state-funded health plans, adds Louise Crandall.

“This is a real danger to Canada,” said Crandall. “Our minister has not expressed a lot of interest in this issue and we’re saying, ‘Time is up, time to act now.’ ”

Clement could not be reached for comment Thursday.

Spokesman Erik Waddell has said the government has no plans to introduce legislation, but is closely monitoring the drug supply and will be ready to take quick action at the first sign of shortages.

There have been various bills before the U.S. Congress in recent years aimed at making it easier for uninsured and underinsured Americans to get affordable prescription drugs.

But fears the floodgates could soon open wide were heightened earlier this fall when U.S. Customs reversed a year-old policy of seizing drug shipments from Canada and President George W. Bush signed a law allowing Americans crossing the Canadian border to bring back small amounts of prescription drugs.

Many legislators saw the law as just the first step to full legalization.

A sweeping ban would effectively kill the cross-border trade, which at its peak was worth more than US\$1 billion a year but has struggled in recent years against the strong Canadian dollar and supply restrictions from brand-name drug makers.

The largest industry group representing online pharmacies insists there is no looming threat to the Canadian drug supply.

“One would hope the Canadian government would not kill an industry until they absolutely see that the law that is passed — if indeed there is a law passed — actually will cause harm to the Canadian market,” said Gord Haugh, general manager of the Canadian International Pharmacy Association.

He said his organization has always supported efforts to ban bulk exports, but sees no need to stop individual Americans from doing business with Canadian online pharmacies.

Fewer drugs actually come from Canada because more companies subcontract dispensing to suppliers in other countries, such as New Zealand, Britain and Israel.

Both the former Liberal government and the present Conservative one have acknowledged Canada can't be the drugstore for the United States.

Last fall, former health minister Ujjal Dosanjh introduced legislation to ban bulk exports, but the bill died when the federal election was called.

The Conservatives had supported the bill, but Crandall calls their current position frustrating.

She said to wait until there is evidence of problems will be too late.

“Drug shortages are very difficult to monitor,” said Crandall. “We have not seen evidence of a plan, or tools or monitoring.”