

Drive a little, save a lot: a pharmaceutical odyssey

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— Robert Yoshioka

Living near Southern California has its advantages! We are generally out of the smog and unhealthy overcast that routinely afflicts southern residents of the “Golden State,” and yet we still have access to many of the delights that make Los Angeles and San Diego Counties a tourist destination for people from around the world! As we try to age gracefully, we find that we are not immune to the “slings and arrows of outrageous” health costs, particularly the cost of prescription medications, and to that end, we routinely search for reliable and viable alternative providers of said drugs.

While many individuals and governmental (state and local) entities across the country look to our neighbor to the north - Canada - to meet their prescription medication needs, and while our own Federal Government, with the blessing of the giant pharmaceutical companies, is actively trying to stem the tide of senior citizens crossing over into Canada to purchase their meds or via the Internet, there continues to be a steady stream of Americans who routinely cross our SOUTHERN border with Mexico to secure supplies of drugs for their personal use, in order to be able to afford the benefits of modern medicine.

I have been visiting pharmacies in Mexico for years, and would like to share some general information with those of you who might be considering such a trip the next time you find yourselves in San Diego, Orange County or even Los Angeles. Saving money is not the only consideration for purchasing your medications in Mexico. Foremost in your mind should be issues of safety, purity, reliability, access and then relative cost.

Prescription drugs in both Canada and Mexico are subject to each country’s strict (though different) inspection, approval and distribution rules. The fact that each country has different rules for the prescription and sales of drugs DOES NOT necessarily impact on the QUALITY of drugs generally available. Look at it this way - would a national government knowingly sell drugs to members of its population if it knew that the drugs were not manufactured, packaged or sold properly?

Canada, like the US and most of the countries in Western Europe are considered “First World Countries.” Mexico, our neighbor to the south is considered by many to be a “Second World Country,” and shares many societal elements with us.

We pay more here because the giant Pharmas spend more here on research and development (R & D), marketing, and patent protection enforcement for their drugs. It is argued that the Pharmas need the resources of a “First World” country in order to discover, create, test manufacture, and distribute new and effective drugs. What better place to recoup their investment than in a free market economy this is increasingly being de-regulated? Paying increasingly higher prices for new drugs would be fine, if most of the citizens who need these drugs could afford them, but in an increasingly bifurcated economic system where the sustaining middle class is being forced into poverty by greedy entrepreneurs and members of the privileged upper class, cost effective means of securing life-saving/sustaining medications need to be explored.

When a drug passes the stringent approval criteria set forth by the FDA, that drug is protected from commercial abuse (theft of formula, manufacturing by unsanctioned producers, etc.) for the life of the patent. Recently physicians and patients in other countries have been clamoring for Pharmas to release or re-price their under-patent drugs because of need, or for humanitarian considerations. The case of AIDS drugs comes to mind here. But I digress.

If you are interested in looking into the possibility of purchasing your routine health-maintenance drugs in Mexico (or anywhere outside of the US, for that matter), you need to walk yourself through the following checklist:

1. Make a COMPLETE LIST OF ALL MEDICATIONS YOU CURRENTLY TAKE. This list should contain the following information:
 - a. Name of Medication and Name of Manufacturer (Johnson & Johnson, Wyeth, AmGen...etc).
 - b. Generic Name of Medication.
 - c. Dosage Level (how much, how often).
 - d. Cost in US for Medication (per prescription fill/refill).
 - e. Prescription (copy) from your physician - leave the original at home.

Note: If you do not know the generic name of your medication, and do not wish to ask your physician, you can go to www.rxlist.com and find out what it is. Prescription medications are marketed under brand names but often your physician will prescribe the generic form of the drug, if available, as the generic form of the drug - if off patent - is usually significantly cheaper than the brand name drug.

2. Make a COMPLETE LIST OF ALL OVER THE COUNTER (OTC) MEDICATIONS, including all vitamins/mineral/herbal supplements that you take:
 - a. Name of OTC vitamin/mineral/herbal supplement.
 - b. Name of active ingredient (in the case of OTC Drug).
 - c. Amount of each that you routinely take.
 - d. General estimate of cost for EACH supplement.

Note: Don't faint when you see what it is costing you to maintain some semblance of health - let alone wellness! Also, be aware, that vitamin/mineral/herbal supplements are not as readily available, nor are they as aggressively marketed in Mexico, as they are here in the US.

3. REMEMBER TO TAKE YOUR LIST WITH YOU WHEN YOU GO TO MEXICO (OR CANADA FOR THAT MATTER) AND HAVE IT AT THE READY WHEN YOU CONSULT WITH PHARMACY PERSONNEL IN EITHER VENUE.

Now that you have gotten over the sticker shock of maintaining your health, you are armed with the information you need to be an informed consumer! Even if you do not choose to deal with pharmaceutical industries in either Mexico or Canada at this point, you should be better able to determine for yourself what is going on with your health, and maybe even take your list to your physician (or pharmacist) and get a drug interaction evaluation.

As we grow older, there is a tendency to keep taking drugs that were prescribed awhile ago, and, as is often the case when one uses an HMO, you need to keep track of your own meds, as your primary physician might not remember to monitor your TOTAL drug use, as she/he is often pressed for time. Wellness is YOUR responsibility. You need to take a pro-active position with regard to the meds you take, period, and that includes OTC drugs and vitamin/mineral/herbal supplements.

Preparing for the "Farmacia Mexicana" Experience.

International trade and commerce is always SO exciting! Notwithstanding any angst that you might have because your karma is not up to snuff...perhaps because you are cutting your meds by some proportion due to rising cost? Anyway, once you cross the border, and are in a FOREIGN country, look around you. What do you see? Why there are pharmacies cheek-by-jowl on almost every street, Maud! Music blaring, flags and banners fluttering, windows plastered with advertisements for the "latest" "drug of choice," all promising the lowest prices in town...yeah sure! And street hawkers! Lordy, the street hawkers!

Well, actually, their prices are all lower than here in the good old US of A, but where to start, who to buy from and how much to pay? The answer is simplicity itself. Be prepared to pay cash, be prepared to bargain a little, and if you must pay with a credit card, make sure that your credit card company knows that you are going to be in Mexico (you need to check with them before you cross the border) or you run the risk of your card not working, especially if you plan to buy stuff on the weekend!

Over the years I have purchased my diabetes medication (metformin) from a number of establishments - from the kiosk attached to a supermercado (supermarket) in Tijuana to a modest, but clean, stand-alone "Farmacia" in Ensenada. The only problem I have EVER had was because I forgot to inform my credit card company that I was going to want to charge purchases in Mexico (see precaution above).

Early on, I thought that the pharmacies closest to the border MUST have higher prices, so one trip, when I was not in a hurry, had on a good pair of walking shoes, and was travelling with friends who regularly indulge my penchant for bargain shopping, I managed to visit over two dozen storefront pharmacies, not only near the border, but all up and down the Avenida Revolucion. My feet hurt, I was hungry and tired and found, to my utter amazement, that the price for an equivalent quantity of metformin varied no more than 8% between and amongst all of the drugstores I priced.

There was some discounting, but if you are willing to absorb the 3-5% surcharge to use your credit card, then the prices largely the same. It finally dawned on me to ask one of the salespersons (someone who spoke English) why the prices did not vary much from store to store?

He told me that the Mexican Government did set price guidelines for the merchandising of pharmaceuticals throughout Mexico, but that the prices varied within the country depending on market forces in individual states (thus explaining why my metformin was more expensive when I tried to get some in Cancun while on holiday - resort prices are generally higher). He continued that there was some room for negotiation, but that there was a floor that had to be observed when pricing drugs.

The “floor” pricing for off-patent drugs in Mexico is many times less than the price one would have to pay in the US for an equivalent formulation. The reason to have the generic names for your prescription is that the salespersons in the drug stores can look up the Mexican equivalent for your prescription in their formulary to see if there is a generic Mexican drug that is available. In the case of metformin, the Mexican generic equivalent is called metformina, and is marketed under various brand names, but the generic name, metformina is always listed on the bottle of pills. I had a chance to look in the Mexican equivalent of our PDR (Physician’s Desk Reference) that listed all drugs approved for dispensing in Mexico. Sure enough, metformina (metformin) was listed.

As prices vary, let me just say that my out-of-pocket cost for one month’s supply of metformin (without insurance, no co-pay) is about the same as what it cost me, in Mexico, to purchase FIVE MONTHS’ WORTH of the same drug - a considerable savings, don’t you think? If one has health insurance with a prescription benefit, then the cost of purchasing metformin is almost a wash. I was able to purchase only one and half month’s supply of metformin for what it cost me for a month’s supply of metformin when I had health insurance. But as many of you who are reading this article DO NOT have health insurance, international purchasing of your prescription medications should be considered, if the alternative is doing without, or taking less than is prescribed by your physician.

Also, please note, you need to factor in the cost of gas, food and lodging associated with you getting to the border, in order to determine if purchasing your meds in Mexico (or Canada) for that matter, is worth the “savings.”

Product Identification, Branding, and the Question of Quality

I am often asked if I have any concerns about the quality of the drugs that I routinely purchase in Mexico, and my answer is, “yes, I do have concerns about the quality of drugs that I routinely purchase in Mexico.” As is the case here in the US, one has to be observant and exercise common sense when negotiating for the purchase of pharmaceuticals.

1. Make sure that what you are buying has the same brand name, or that it is called by it’s correct generic nomenclature.
2. Check the expiration date on the bottle or package.
3. Determine if the bottle has been opened or tampered with (just like here in the US...if the seal is broken, look for another bottle).
4. Ask if the pharmacy has enough supply of this drug to cover your total purchase. Insist on all the drugs being either from the same manufacturer or from the same lot. It is not wise to mix brands, unless they are willing to give you a BIG discount!
5. Depending on the medication, sometimes medications are more expensive - on patent - but as you have your price list attached to your prescription list, that should be an easy thing to determine.
6. Check to see who made the medication - Johnson & Johnson, Wyeth, AmGen... - you will be surprised! The listed Mexican drug manufacturer will most certainly be the same one that makes the drug you purchase in the US, or will be a subsidiary of same!

Coming Home

Assume that you have been successful in your shopping excursion. Here you are, getting ready to cross the border. You will still have to pass muster. Depending on the quantity of stuff you are bringing back - and this is where planning comes in - you should either travel on foot or by car.

Going across the border and returning by car is very simple. If you declare at the border that you visited for the day and that you have some merchandise you purchased for personal consumption - and you LOOK legitimate, you will be waved through without any problems.

On the other hand, if you give the border authorities any reason to suspect you are doing something out of the ordinary, you will be pulled out of line and subjected to a more thorough interrogation. If you are able to produce your comprehensive list of prescription medications, along with **copies of your prescription from your American**

doctor, you will be allowed through with only a warning.

Crossing on foot is much the same, except that you will probably be carrying your purchased in shopping bags or in your backpack. One does not need a passport for daytrips into Mexico, but make sure that you have some sort of official identification - your driver's license should suffice - and remember to be respectful and pleasant to the border agents. Even yours truly is contrite and dutiful when crossing the border with my goodies!

Your health is important. Having to consider alternative sources from which to purchase medications is not a good thing, but until part timers throughout the state have access to minimal health insurance that includes a prescription benefit, we will have to be alert to shopping for our meds in Mexico or Canada, either in person or via the Internet. Nobody should have to resort to subterfuge in order to maintain their health.

So, Boys and Girls, trek to San Diego, get on the Internet and aim for wellness. How Much Longer, Part Timers?

Editor's note: There has been much discussion in Congress and the media recently over the limitations on importation of prescription drugs contained in the new prescription drug legislation enacted in December 2003, PL 108-173. The section on importation, Title XI C 1121 (codified as 21 USC 804, part of Chapter VIII of the Federal Food, Drug, and Cosmetic Act, 21 USC 381 et seq), defines "importer" as a pharmacist or wholesaler. Other parts of this section discuss a procedure whereby the government can set up a waiver program, by federal regulation, to allow for importation by individuals. Such a waiver program is required to grant individuals waivers for purchase from Canada (Mexico is not mentioned), and refers to a limitation on quantity to a 90-day supply. The editor, the author, and/or CPFA make no representations as to the meaning and effect of this legislation with respect to individual purchase. The bill can be viewed on-line.