

Importing Drugs Gains Support

Pfizer Official Backs Montgomery's Attempt to Lower Costs

By TIM CRAIG
Washington Post Staff Writer

A top drug company executive broke ranks with industry yesterday and endorsed a proposal before the Montgomery County Council to allow county employees to buy lower-cost prescription drugs from Canada.

Peter Rost, vice president of marketing for Pfizer Inc., said he decided to become one of the first drug industry executives to support the concept because he was tired of hearing colleagues say the practice is a public health risk.

"This has been proven to be safe in Europe," said Rost, who cautioned he was not speaking on behalf of Pfizer. "The real concern about safety is about people who do not take drugs because they cannot afford it. The safety issue is a made-up story."

His comments came as a surprise to his bosses, who maintain that Montgomery officials would put their employees at risk if they approve this measure.

"His position is certainly not Pfizer's," said Bryant Haskins, a Pfizer spokesman. "We do not think importation is a good thing."

Rost spoke yesterday at a news conference organized to rally support for the plan, which would allow the county to contract with a drug benefits manager to provide lower cost medicine, on a voluntary basis, to county employees and retirees.

Supporters, led by council member Tom Perez (D-Silver Spring), argued that the plan could save the county as much as \$15 million a year.

Opponents, including the Rockville-based U.S. Food and Drug Administration, say importing prescription medicines is illegal, and they warn that the county risks alienating its formidable biotech industry if it encourages the use of Canadian drugs. The Montgomery county attorney's office has issued two opinions saying the county risks federal prosecution if it embarks



Montgomery Council member Tom Perez contended that purchasing lower-cost drugs from Canada could save \$15 million a year.

on the effort.

With the council scheduled to take up the matter Sept. 21, both sides have been stepping up their activity.

Last week, the Maryland Pharmacists Association brought a member of former New York mayor Rudolph W. Giuliani's consulting firm and the head of a Florida AIDS advocacy group to urge the council to reject the measure.

Yesterday, Perez trotted out Rost and Michael Albano, the former mayor of Springfield, Mass., to support it.

Albano helped push through a measure to allow 9,000 Springfield employees and retirees to purchase Canadian prescription drugs. The Montgomery County Council, Albano said, had an opportunity to "send shock waves across the country" if it begins doing the same thing because it is home to the FDA.

"It would really give this issue a great deal of political momentum going forward," Albano said.

Although the FDA maintains the practice is illegal, it has yet to sue a local government to halt drug importation.

It appears increasingly likely that Montgomery will approve the measure when the council

votes next week.

Five of nine council members co-sponsored the measure. And yesterday, council member Nancy Floreen (D-At Large) announced she also would probably support it.

"As long as we make it voluntary, and we are not forcing anybody, and if we can save some money, I believe the safety issues will be adequately addressed," Floreen said, noting the county would use a regulated pharmacy to make the cross-border transactions.

But council member Michael Knapp (D-Upcounty) said he probably will vote against the measure because he worries it would send the wrong message to biotechnology companies that are considering moving into the county. He also said he is not convinced it would save the county money.

Rost, who joined Pfizer in 2001, said he has seen dramatic savings in northern European countries that reimport drugs from southern Europe, where he says prescription drugs are 50 percent cheaper.

Before joining Pfizer, Rost worked for Wyeth-Ayerst/Lederle Laboratories, serving as its director of European commercial operations from 1996 to 1998. During that time, he said, he never heard any European government or regulatory agency raise safety concerns.

"I think it is derogatory to suggest Americans would not be able to handle the reimportation of drugs when the rest of the educated world can do this," Rost said.

While he conceded that the industry could lose some money in the short term if Americans were to import drugs from Canada, Rost said it would remain highly profitable.

"I think the industry looks at this in the same way the [National Rifle Association] looks at gun control," Rost said. "They are afraid if there is a crack in the wall, the whole dam will come bursting."