Using medications purchased in Mexico: Position statement of the Texas Society of Health-System Pharmacists

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Since the Institute of Medicine released its report, To Err Is Human: Building a Safer Health System, much has been written about medication-safety issues in hospitals. During the same time period, the importation of medications from Mexico has continued to grow with little public concern about the safety issues involved. While several studies have examined this practice over the past 10 years, a definitive study of the impact of Americans buying medications in Mexico has not been conducted.

An article in the New York Times identified this medication-buying practice in the elderly population, stating that many older Americans go to Mexico seeking discounts for their maintenance medications. The article cited a recent Food and Drug Administration (FDA) survey, which found that 46% of Americans returning from purchasing medications in Mexico were over 50 years old. Medications declared at customs by the people participating in this survey included antimicrobials and medications for diabetes mellitus, estrogen replacement, arthritis, impotence, and pain. While the data in that article are consistent with the idea that the typical tourist goes to Mexico to save money on drugs, a study by McKelthan and Shepherd published in 1996 identified a different reality at the Laredo border. Their study, which analyzed customs declaration forms, identified the mean ± S.D. age of the people importing medications from Mexico as 34.5 ± 10.7 years, revealing a different demographic group than originally expected. Likewise, analysis of these medications was different from the results of the FDA survey, with 14 of the top 15 imported drugs being benzodiazepines, stimulants, and narcotic analgesics. Other reports have indicated that medications that have been outlawed in the United States because of known health problems are imported from Mexico. One example is the combination of phentermine and fenfluramine, once used as a diet aid and removed from the U.S. market after several users died from cardiac damage. These drugs are still available for purchase in Mexico.

The importation of medications from Mexico has become big business, causing the number of pharmacies in border towns to increase dramatically. In Tijuana, the number of pharmacies tripled to 1500 between 1997 and 2001. Border crossings increased more than 5% from 1998 to 2000, when the number reached 293 million. A study conducted in 1990 estimated that 25% of tourists returning from Mexico return with pharmaceuticals purchased during their visit. If this estimate is accurate, over 73 million tourists returned from Mexico with pharmaceuticals during 2000.

There are many public safety issues associated with using medications purchased in Mexico. These issues are compounded by the sheer volume of pharmaceuticals that are purchased across the border. In many cases, patients are willing to accept health risks that are far beyond what is deemed acceptable when seeking health care in the United States.

The delivery of health care in Mexico differs from the United States. Most pharmacies in Mexico are not staffed with university-trained pharmacists, but with clerks who have learned through experience to dispense drugs. Drugs that require prescriptions in the United States, such as antimicrobials, anti-
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Pharmacists in Mexico often diagnose patients and prescribe and dispense medications, although they are not required to be licensed. Pharmacists do not maintain patient profiles or screen for drug interactions. Prescriptions are normally dispensed in the manufacturer’s packaging without providing patient-specific information or directions on the label. Each of these factors increases the risk to patient safety.

According to the Health Ministry of Mexico, 90% of the medications sold in Mexico are manufactured in Mexico. While controlled substances, which are growing because they are easy to buy and not required to be licensed, Pharmacists to dispense medications without one. Prescriptions may be written by a wide range of individuals, from physicians to dentists to homeopathic physicians, veterinarians, social workers, and nurses.

Another serious concern along the Texas border is related to the availability of antimicrobials in Mexico. Because of these serious safety issues, TSHP believes that the importation of medications from Mexico is extremely dangerous. For patients and discourages this practice.

Overuse and misuse of antimicrobials bought in Mexico have created serious concerns about antimicrobial resistance along the U.S.-Mexico border. The Mexican drug distribution system, which primarily uses nonpharmacists to dispense medications and does not require patient-specific information on the labeling, is extremely dangerous. Because of these serious safety issues, TSHP believes that the importation of medications from Mexico is dangerous for patients and discourages this practice.

**References**