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Amendment aims to help consumers judge drugs

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STATES NEWS SERVICE

WASHINGTON — A bipartisan group of House members, led by Rep. Thomas Allen, D-Maine, plans to propose an amendment to the Medicare reform bill that would help consumers assess the medical effectiveness and costs of prescription drugs.



Allen

Allen's \$75 million proposal, the Prescription Drug Comparative Effectiveness Act, would authorize the National Institutes of Health and the Agency for Healthcare Research Quality to research the quality and cost-effectiveness of prescription drugs and make that information available to the public over the Internet.

"Today, so many decisions about prescription drugs are driven by TV ads," Allen said Wednesday at a news conference that included several Republican supporters. "This will ensure that physicians and patients will have access to unbiased comparative information and will allow them to make better decisions."

The measure faces a formidable set of legislative hurdles, including the need to secure enough support on the House Energy and Commerce Committee, where amendments to the Medicare reform bill will be

considered. In addition to Allen, several other co-sponsors of the proposal are on the committee — Rep. Henry A. Waxman, D-Calif., Rep. Mary Bono, R-Calif., and Rep. Jim Davis, D-Fla. The bill has five Democratic and six Republican co-sponsors in the House.

Allen's spokesman, Mark Sullivan, said the congressman "definitely" plans to push the proposal as an amendment to the Medicare bill when it comes before the House committee.

The committee is expected to begin marking up the Medicare bill as early as next week, during which it will solidify an agreement made this week by House leaders to offer Medicare recipients the same prescription drug benefits that the Bush administration would like to offer those who enter private health plans.

The independent cost-benefit analysis would create a way for the government to provide data about cheaper generic alternatives to expensive brand-name drugs.

The drug industry has come under increasing scrutiny in Congress for its role in pushing up the costs of health care, particularly through the use of aggressive advertising tactics that compel patients to request more expensive brands from their physicians.

Federal regulators have also increasingly cleared the way for generic alternatives to position themselves in the U.S. market as patents on innovative drugs expire.

Calling the financial impact of rising drug costs on Medicare and Medicaid a "sieve in the federal treasury," Rep. Zach Wamp, R-Tenn., said the bill is crucial in preventing the private and public medical insurance systems from collapsing under the weight of increasing drug costs.

Randy Burkholder, policy analyst with the largest organization representing the drug industry, Pharmaceutical Research and Manufacturers of America, said the organization is opposed to Allen's proposal because it would result in the

government directing consumer medical decisions.

"It will encourage more simplistic, one-size-fits-all decisions about who gets certain medicines," he said. "The idea of the government coming up with a determination of value is very difficult and very subjective."

Sen. Jeff Bingaman, D-N.M., has agreed to introduce similar legislation in the Senate and may offer an amendment to the Medicare bill once it reaches the Senate floor, Sullivan said.

The Senate Finance Committee begins marking up its version of the Medicare bill today.