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Drug Firms Gain Church Group's Aid

Claim About Import Measure Stirs Anger

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A Christian lobbying group fighting the proposed importation of low-cost prescription drugs has received behind-the-scenes help from the drug industry, the latest example of pharmaceutical companies trying to influence Congress clandestinely.

The Traditional Values Coalition, which bills itself as a Christian advocacy group representing 43,000 churches, has mailed to the districts of several conservative House Republicans this sharply disputed warning: Legislation to allow the importation of U.S.-made pharmaceuticals from Canada and Europe might make RU-486, called the "abortion pill," as easy to get as aspirin.

The Traditional Values Coalition (TVC) portrays its campaign as a moral fight for the "sanctity of life." Documents provided to The Washington Post, however, show that drug lobbyists played a key role in crafting its argument and in disseminating the information to lawmakers. Pharmaceutical companies oppose the legislation -- which would legalize the reimportation of U.S.-made prescription drugs that sell for less in Canada than in the United States -- not over abortion but because it would erode their profits.

The bill, likely to be voted on this week, is popular with many lawmakers seeking to reduce the cost of medicine for older Americans without relying on government subsidies. Opponents say it would open the door to unsafe and less regulated drugs and drain profits that companies use, in part, to research and develop new medicines.

A recent TVC letter sent to Congress was signed by the coalition's executive director, Andrea Sheldon Lafferty. It was originally drafted, however, by Tony Rudy, a lobbyist for pharmaceutical companies and a former top aide to House Majority Leader Tom DeLay (R-Tex.), computer records show. Lafferty also circulated a memo -- linking the legislation to RU-486's availability -- that was drafted by Bruce Kuhlik, a senior vice president at the Pharmaceutical Research and Manufacturers of America (PhRMA), a trade group funded by the nation's biggest pharmaceutical firms.

A Republican close to TVC said Rudy also helped arrange funding for the group's direct-mail campaign, which targeted nearly two dozen Republicans even though they generally oppose abortion rights. Several Republicans said pharmaceutical companies, through their lobbyists, contacted other conservative groups, including the Christian Coalition, about waging a similar campaign against the reimportation measure. The Traditional Values Coalition was the only taker because several abortion opponents questioned the accuracy of the drug industry's argument, according to lawmakers and conservative activists.

PhRMA, one of Washington's most influential lobbying groups, has long paid other organizations -- often those with friendly-sounding names such as the United Seniors Association -- to promote legislation favored by Pfizer Inc., Eli Lilly and Co. and other leading drugmakers. The idea is to make the campaigns appear driven by seniors, who spend the most on medicines, or, in this case, Christian activists. Government watchdog groups say such campaigns, which generally do not have to disclose

their financing, are deceptive and misleading. In the legislative fight over imported drugs, the United Seniors Association is warning lawmakers and voters of the "dangers of imported drugs."

In a letter to lawmakers, Lafferty said the reimportation bill would create new "avenues" for buying abortion drugs and would "effectively repeal" the law that prohibits the sale of abortion products through the mail. Proponents of the bill say it would do nothing to make RU-486 more available, because patients would still need a doctor's prescription.

With the House vote expected to be close, PhRMA is trying to peel off supporters one by one, tailoring its argument to individual lawmakers' concerns. In this case, the TVC mailings to abortion opponents included a picture of a baby and asked whether the targeted lawmakers will "miss an opportunity to protect the sanctity of human life."

House Republicans were so offended by the mailings that they recently barred the TVC and its leader, the Rev. Louis P. Sheldon, from attending future meetings of the Values Action Team, an umbrella group of socially conservative Republicans. "We stand united in opposition to the unethical and unacceptable tactics you have employed to force pro-life members of Congress to support your views," Rep. Joseph R. Pitts (R-Pa.) said in a letter to Sheldon.

Rep. Jo Ann Emerson (R-Mo.), an abortion opponent who was targeted by the TVC mailings, said in an interview: "It makes me so angry I could spit."

It is unclear who paid for the direct-mail campaign, although several Republicans said drug companies were behind it. Rudy, whose clients include PhRMA and Eli Lilly, declined to comment for this story.

Lafferty said she promised the House "leadership" she would not talk to reporters about the matter. She neither confirmed nor denied that the TVC received money from Alexander Strategy Group, which is headed by Rudy and former DeLay chief of staff Ed Buckham. PhRMA spokesman Jeff Truitt would not comment.

Rep. Dan Burton (R-Ind.) and several other conservatives are blaming the drug companies for the mailing campaign, though they offered no specific evidence linking the mailing to PhRMA or individual companies.

"I do not understand . . . how a religious organization can be manipulated by the pharmaceutical industry to do this sort of thing," Burton said. "They are supposed to be moral people. And yet I am confident, in fact I am dead sure, that the Traditional Values Coalition did not have the money to mail this kind of trash out to congressional districts all across the country."

The National Review, a conservative magazine, reported last week that other socially conservative groups were offered money to spread the message that the legislation could lead to more abortions. Since then, several GOP lawmakers have called on Sheldon to disclose who paid for the campaign.

DeLay, an ally of the drug companies, vowed yesterday to defeat the legislation, which he called "horrible policy."

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