

# Bangor Daily News

THURSDAY, MAY 2, 2002

## LEARNING FROM CANADA

**M**aine's senators recently supported a bill to offer Americans discount prescription drugs through government price controls — as long as the government exerting the control was in Ottawa and not Washington. Their support of a measure to allow wholesale drug imports from Canada is needed and welcome, but they would do even better by supporting a measure to have the U.S. government take care of its own.

The proposal backed by Sens. Olympia Snowe and Susan Collins allows wholesalers to reimport the drugs, and individuals holding the proper prescription could personally obtain a 90-day supply of Canadian drugs to anywhere in the United States, including by mail, telephone and over the Internet. Maine residents have been crossing the border for the last couple of years to obtain discount drugs; this plan would extend the discount to the rest of the country.

Canada's drug prices are lower than those in the United States because the Canadian government insists on a discounted price, with the savings passed on to consumers, just as nearly every developed country does. For several years Rep. Tom Allen has been trying to get the same sort of discount for American seniors on Medicare but no Republicans would sign on to his plan, although the Senate version, S. 699, was sponsored by Senate Majority Leader Tom Daschle and his South Dakota colleague, Sen. Tim Johnson.

As Sen. Collins correctly observed, U.S. taxpayers make a substantial investment in basic research for the medications that pharmaceutical companies then sell to them at some of

the highest prices in the world. "It simply does not seem fair that American consumers are footing the bill for the remarkable, yet costly, advancements in pharmaceutical research while our neighbors across the border receive these medications at substantially lower prices," she said.

But if the senators have no objection to governments negotiating prices, and they couldn't and still recommend Americans take advantage of Canadian negotiated prices, then the answer is for Washington to do some negotiating of its own, and it is a fair guess that Rep. Allen would have no objection to the senators expanding his idea beyond just Medicare recipients. Sen. Snowe's spokesman says the senator won't support this idea because there is not enough support for it already and a more comprehensive bill is needed anyway. Sen. Collins' spokeswoman says her senator doesn't like the Allen approach because it cannot provide a steep enough discount and it may shift costs to other consumers. Both say the Canadian plan is only a temporary measure.

A cost shift could be avoided by expanding the number of people covered. The discount in the Allen bill could be as steep as the Canadian discount. And while a more comprehensive approach certainly is needed, this proposal doesn't impede progress any more than the reimportation plan does and could also be a temporary measure, tied to passage of a comprehensive plan and serving as inspiration for the drug industry to help pass a bill.

The lack of GOP support for the Allen bill could be addressed by a couple of GOP senators being the first to sign on.