

PHARMACISTS HAIL THE E-PRESCRIPTION

'FASTER, EASIER, SAFER'

Electronic system
likely to cut number
of medication errors

BY TOM BLACKWELL

Health Canada is working on new legislation that could revolutionize how Canadians obtain medication, allowing doctors to send prescriptions electronically to the pharmacist.

Officials hope the idea will cut dramatically the number of medication errors caused by illegible or mis-read prescriptions, and reduce the incidence of problems like double doctoring.

Computerization is also expected to make drug ordering considerably more convenient for patients, too.

"The ability for health care providers to transmit information straight from an examining room to a pharmacist will make the process faster, easier and safer for Canadians," said Jirina Vlck, a spokeswoman for Health Canada.

"E-prescribing ... will significantly reduce medical errors and costs."

The idea of electronic prescriptions has long been discussed by health reformers, ideally as part of a wider effort to computerize medical records.

But current federal regulations require prescriptions to be written on paper or delivered orally to the pharmacist.

Health Canada, aided by the independent Canada Health Infoway, is developing rules that would make the practice legal.

Draft legislation could be ready by April and the new regulations in place by early next year, Health Canada officials told provincial pharmacy regulators at a meeting recently.

Statistics on the phenomenon are hard to find. It is widely accepted, however, that messy prescription scribbling by doctors causes frequent errors, such as dispensing the wrong drug or dose and providing incorrect instructions on how and when to take the medication, says the U.S.-based Institute for Safe Medication Practices.

The organization estimates that pharmacists in the United States make more than 150 million calls a year to physicians to clarify prescription information, wasting time and resources.

Officials hope electronic prescriptions will become part of broader databases of information on patients' health and drug use that could reduce drug errors, with computer alerts when it looks like a prescription might cause problems. Such a system could also raise alarms if a patient tries to obtain duplicate prescriptions from more than one doctor.

The Canadian Institute of

Health Information notes in one of its annual reports that an electronic prescription system, a concept being tried in the United Kingdom and Australia, could save 700 lives annually.

The pharmacy industry and its regulators in Canada are behind the idea, even though it could result in added costs for druggists.

"This is a direction we want to take," said Ken Potvin of the National Association of Pharmacy Regulatory Authorities. "There is a belief that electronic prescriptions will improve patient safety."

But he said his members want to ensure certain conditions are

met in any electronic system. Those prerequisites include safeguards for patient privacy, a means for pharmacists to verify the authenticity and accuracy of an E-prescription, a way of preventing diversion of the order to multiple pharmacies and a guarantee that patients can choose the pharmacist they want to fill their prescription.

Under one model, doctors would send the order directly to a pharmacy; in another the prescription would be zapped to a central computer repository, to be pulled out by the pharmacist of choice.

The system has other advantages for patients, too, simplifying the refill process and removing the need to physically deliver a prescription, said Louise Crandall, a spokeswoman for the Canadian Pharmacists Association.

"It's more convenient," she said. "They can just go in when the prescription is ready. They don't have to wait around for 20 minutes."

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