

State and Local

Generic drugs replace name brands at steady rate; supplies are limited

By Melisa Hohlt
Reporter

Generic drugs are steadily replacing some name-brand drugs in many homes and are saving consumers a lot of money, two local pharmacists say.

Generic drugs always have been available, pharmacist Debbie Wood says, but not all drugs have a generic equivalent.

The patent on a name-brand drug must expire before another company can begin manufacturing the drug and selling it under a new name, she says.

Another reason for limited numbers of generics is money, Wood says. If very few patients use a particular drug, she says, a company would lose more money making a generic than it would gain from selling one.

Wood says time-release drugs, such as Contac, cannot be substituted because the time-release factor is difficult to pinpoint.

A doctor must specify on a prescription whether the patient is to receive a name-brand drug or whether a generic can be substituted, Wood says.

If the doctor permits a generic substitute, patients can discuss it with the pharmacist and decide which drug they would rather take.

Generic drugs are 20 percent to 50 percent cheaper than name-brand drugs because name-brand companies already have spent the

time and money to develop the product.

Because generic companies can produce the same product without having to test it, they can offer it to pharmacies for less money than name-brand drugs, and it can be sold to patients for less money.

The generics are the same product, Wood says, except for the inactive ingredients and fillers used to hold the tablets together. She says

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— Guy Foster, pharmacist

these fillers can cause problems because some people are allergic to them.

But Skaggs Alpha Beta pharmacist Guy Foster says all companies use the same binders and starches in their products as fillers, so allergies should not be of concern.

Foster says generics are 10 percent to 20 percent equivalent to their name-brand counterparts, meaning the quality of the generic product may not be the same as that of the name-brand product.

A lot of generic companies produce generic drugs, he says.

The manufacturing process is important to the outcome of the product, Foster says.

Generic houses that manufacture generic drugs do not have the expertise of bigger manufacturers.

These houses also do not have as much to lose as the larger manufacturers, often resulting in a poorer product, Foster says.

Foster used the example of aspirin to demonstrate differences among medicines.

If one company produces aspirin that is packed very hard, he says, the

product will pass through the body without being absorbed.

If another company produces the same product that is not packed as hard, the aspirin is absorbed by the body and is more effective.

Wood says if one product is 20 percent greater in effectiveness than another, the product could be toxic. But if it is 20 percent less effective than the same product as a name-brand, it could be ineffective.

Wood says pharmacists receive catalogs from drug companies from which they can order generic drugs. The prices range from extremely low to just lower name-brand prices.

But Wood says that because of these mail-order companies, a patient may get confused.

One month he may get a pink pill, and the next month he may get a blue pill for the same drug.

This is because mail-order companies use different drug companies and may not buy from the same one all the time, she says.

The source of generics depends on the pharmacist's judgment, Wood says.

"The key is to make sure you buy from a reputable pharmacy," Wood says. "I go with a drug company I know and trust."

But Foster says pharmacies' companies may choose the drug companies, or pharmacies may purchase generic drugs through wholesalers.

The pharmacy should buy from reputable manufacturers, he says, and not always buy the cheapest on the market.

"You want it to work," Foster says. "If the generic is a quality one, you have the advantage of it being less expensive."

But if it's not a quality product, you're just wasting your money."

The only way to be sure a pharmacy is reputable, Foster says, is to trust the pharmacist.

If a generic drug is being substituted, he says, Texas law forbids the pharmacist to use the name-brand equivalent on the prescription.

Foster says the pharmacist cannot even say the generic is the same as the name-brand one because the patient could be misled into believing he's buying something he isn't.

Official: Texas not given equal funding

Commissioner: Imbalance hurts health-care programs

By Robert Morris
Staff Writer

Texas has long been denied equal federal funding for substance abuse and mental health programs because of the formulas used to allocate money to states, an official of the Texas Commission on Alcohol and Drug Abuse said.

Bill Britcher, public information officer for the commission, said

those formulas, which require funding to remain at least at an equal level to the previous year in every state, have resulted in unbalanced allocation.

In an attempt to correct the situation, U.S. Sen. Lloyd Bentsen, D-Texas, has introduced legislation to insure equity of funding in Texas under the Alcohol, Drug Abuse and Mental Health Block Grant program.

The Bentsen bill would increase funding for Texas by 44.8 percent.

Currently, the average per capita allocation of ADAMH funds is \$2.21, with rates ranging as low as \$1.01 in Iowa to as high as \$6.48 in Vermont. The per capita rate in Texas is \$1.51, according to a study by the Institute on Health and Aging at the University of California.

Texas has 6.4 percent of the population, but is receiving around 4.5

percent of the funds, Britcher said.

Bentsen's formula would base allocation on the number of at-risk individuals in a given state. The formula changes would be phased in over a five-year period.

The category of at-risk individuals is based on the number of people within age groups that are considered to be susceptible to abusing drugs or alcohol. The category includes the population between the ages of 18 and 24 and is weighted more heavily toward males.

The bill is supported by many powerful legislators, including Sen. William Proxmire, D-Wisconsin, and U.S. Rep. Mickey Leland, D-Houston, and is backed by the entire Texas delegation, Britcher said. The House is working on similar legislation that has the support of House Speaker Jim Wright, he added.

However, there is also strong opposition from states currently receiving what Britcher terms "more than their fair share."

"Texas is just not getting a fair return on its tax dollars at this time," he said.

Becky Davis, executive director of the commission, said it is about a half-and-half situation, in terms of appropriate allocation.

"While chances are good for passage, there is also strong opposition," she said.

Britcher agrees, saying that there have been two other attempts to change the formula earlier in the decade that have been defeated.

Commissioner says U.S. may fund study on high-speed rail system

By Melanie Perkins
Staff Writer

The Texas Railroad Commission has received a preliminary commitment from the Federal Railroad Administration for \$375,000 in federal funds to study the potential for high-speed rail passenger service in Texas, Railroad Commissioner James Nugent said in a recent press release.

Brian Schaible, director of information services for the commission, said the commission sent the FRA a detailed plan of exactly how the money will be spent and is awaiting final approval.

The money would be spent studying possible routes and ridership for the high-speed rail, costs of the pro-

ject, financing options, operating revenues, economic impact and the best type of high-speed rail technology for the state, Schaible said.

One of the areas being considered for the project is what's become known as the Texas Triangle — the Dallas-Fort Worth-Houston-San Antonio corridors. Schaible said because of the high cost of the project — in the billions — only corridors between major economic centers are being considered.

Schaible said high-speed rail service is designed for moving people over distances in relatively short periods.

"The idea is that you have a rail system that is designed to carry passengers at speeds in excess of 100 mph," he said. "In some cases, high-

speed rail tests have been run in other countries where the trains have exceeded 200 mph."

In many cases, he said, travel by high-speed rail will be faster than travel by plane when travel to and from the airport is considered.

Price will have to be competitive with air travel, he said, or no one will ride the trains. But the actual price charged to the passenger will depend on a number of factors, including the type of financing obtained.

"Obviously Texas doesn't have \$3 billion in its new budget to go out and build high-speed rails," he said.

The key question is what combination of federal, state and private funds could be assembled to make the railway feasible, he said.

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