

Opening Statement of Senator Herb Kohl
Special Committee on Aging Hearing
“Internet Pharmacy and Importation: Exploring Risks and Benefits”
January 26, 2005

Thank you, Mr. Chairman. First, I want to congratulate you on your new role as Chairman of this committee. You have been a leader on issues that affect our nation’s senior citizens. We have worked together in the past and you have always brought a thoughtful, practical approach to your work that will serve you well as you steer this Committee. The Committee is clearly in good hands, and I am happy to have the opportunity to work with you.

This first hearing is on a topic that is critical for many of our nation’s senior citizens. Prescription drugs have become so expensive here in America that many seniors can’t afford to buy the medicines they need.

This is a system in dire need of reform. Today, American taxpayers foot the bill for most all of the research on the drugs we are talking about today. At the same time, Americans are charged the highest prices in the world for those drugs, which are sold in other countries for a fraction of the price.

Faced with the choice of buying the medicines they need to keep them healthy, or paying for food and rent, many seniors are turning to Canada and the Internet to find drugs at more reasonable prices. Last August, I met with seniors from Wisconsin who are getting their medicines from Canada. Mary Ellen Hayes from De Pere, Wisconsin told me how she was able to cut her \$582 drug bill to \$370. Carole Johnson of Eau Claire saves 30 to 50 percent on most of her prescriptions.

Many States and local communities are doing the same thing. The State of Wisconsin launched a website last February that connects Wisconsin consumers with three approved Canadian pharmacies. So far, the website has had nearly 1.4 million hits. And today, we’ll hear from Mary Jorgensen from the Coalition of Wisconsin Aging Groups about their efforts to help their members find low-cost drugs, often through Canadian mail-order and Internet pharmacies.

The programs in operation today are based on Canadian and Internet pharmacies that have been inspected and certified to be legitimate. But there are also many unregulated sites in operation today. As long as the Federal government refuses to put a sound regulatory system in place for drug importation, we are leaving Americans at risk of falling prey to unscrupulous people who might try to taint the drug supply.

This is a legitimate safety issue that I believe can and must be addressed. Several bills have already been introduced to create stronger safety standards. But as Congress continues to debate this issue, the reality is that drug importation is already happening. It's time for the Administration to stop defending the status quo, issuing reports and setting up new roadblocks, and start working with Congress to give Americans the price relief and safety assurances they need.

Again, I thank you, Mr. Chairman, for holding this hearing. I know we share some of the same views on this topic, and I look forward to working with you to move this important issue forward.

