

US Senate report slams Gilead for high drug costs

Express Scripts offers low-cost alternative to Turing drug

NEW JERSEY, Dec 2, (AP): The US's biggest pharmacy benefits manager is muscling back into the debate over soaring drug costs by promoting a less-expensive alternative to a life-saving medicine with a list price of \$750 per pill.

Express Scripts Holding Co. said Tuesday that it will make a treatment for the rare infection toxoplasmosis that costs \$1 per pill available on its biggest formulary, or list of covered drugs.

Daraprim, the drug that costs \$750 per pill, comes from Turing Pharmaceuticals, which stirred outrage among doctors, patients and politicians when it bought rights to the pill earlier this year and then jacked up the price. The 62-year-old drug had been priced at \$13.50 per pill before that.

Other drugmakers have also recently purchased the rights to old, cheap medicines that are the only treatment for serious diseases and then hiked prices. The cost of some newer medications has raised questions as well, and drug prices consistently rank among the top public concerns, according to opinion polls.

Express Scripts announced its decision

the same day a bipartisan report from the Senate Finance Committee concluded that Gilead Sciences put profit ahead of patients in pricing its breakthrough hepatitis C treatment Sovaldi at \$1,000 per pill.

The Express Scripts decision means that a cheaper alternative to Daraprim created by Imprimis Pharmaceuticals will now be available to about 25 million customers through its formulary. What those customers pay will depend on their insurance coverage. That could mean prescriptions that come with a co-payment as low as \$10 or \$20 for the whole bottle of pills.

Benefits

Express Scripts manages pharmacy benefits for customers like insurers and employers. It makes recommendations on drug coverage, and those customers can then customize the guidelines.

Leaders of the HIV Medicine Association and The Infectious Diseases Society of America said in an email that they are urging other pharmacy benefits managers and health insurers to make the Imprimis option available as well. They noted that care providers have faced "sig-

nificant challenges" in obtaining the treatment for patients since Turing raised the price in August.

A Turing representative said in an email that the company is "committed to ensuring access to patients who need Daraprim and has implemented a number of patient assistance programs" that can limit out-of-pocket payment to \$10 per prescription. The company also said it supplies state-based AIDS drug assistance programs at a price of \$1 per 100-count bottles.

Kathie Hiers, CEO of AIDS Alabama, said that's the rate assistance programs in her state pay for Daraprim. Her nonprofit organization helps patients with HIV and AIDS obtain treatment, medication and other services.

"Those high prices that they're charging for that medication is really for the commercial payers, basically," she said.

Toxoplasmosis is a parasitic infection that mainly threatens people with weak immune systems, such as HIV and organ transplant patients, and pregnant women, because it can kill their baby. Express Scripts says only a few hundred of its customers were treated last year for the infec-

tion, but the company is always looking to remove wasteful spending from the health care system.

"We believe we now have a safe, high-quality and extremely cost-effective way to provide access to a Daraprim alternative," Chief Medical Officer Dr Steve Miller said in a statement from the company.

Imprimis, a 3-1/2 year-old drug-compounding firm based in San Diego, had said in October that it will supply capsules containing the ingredients pyrimethamine and leucovorin as an alternative to Daraprim.

Mass-produced drugs must be approved by the Food and Drug Administration. Imprimis, like other compounding pharmacies, instead makes up individual prescriptions using drug ingredients already approved. In this case, that involves combining pyrimethamine, Daraprim's active ingredient, with leucovorin to limit pyrimethamine's side effects.

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The makers of a breakthrough drug for hepatitis C put profits before patients in pricing the \$1,000 pill that cures the liver-wasting disease, US Senate investigators

said Tuesday.

A bipartisan report from the Senate Finance Committee concluded that California-based Gilead Sciences was focused on maximizing revenue even as the company's own analysis showed a lower price would allow more patients to be treated.

Although the report focused on just one drug that has made headlines in the last few years, the lawmakers who led the investigation said their findings are a warning about what's to come with other high-priced treatments for cancer, diabetes, Alzheimer's and HIV.

"I'm telling you, this is the future," said Sen. Ron Wyden, a Democrat. "The future is going to be about specialty drugs."

In a statement, Gilead said it disagreed with the report's conclusions.

The company's first breakthrough pill was called Sovaldi; priced at \$1,000 per pill, or \$84,000 for a full course of treatment. Gilead has since introduced a more expensive next-generation pill called Harvoni, which is highly effective and simpler for patients to take. That one is priced at \$94,500 for a course of treatment.

"Gilead responsibly and thoughtfully priced Sovaldi and Harvoni," said the company's statement, noting that more than 600,000 patients have been treated worldwide since the introduction of Sovaldi two years ago.

But Wyden and Sen Chuck Grassley, a Republican, said their 18-month investigation found that the high price tag significantly limited patient access and heaped huge costs on federal and state health care programs.

Hepatitis C is a viral infection that affects some 3 million people in the US and claims more lives here than AIDS. Patients say the disease feels like a bad flu that never goes away. While the illness advances gradually, it can ultimately destroy the liver, requiring a transplant to save the patient's life. The virus is primarily spread by contact with infected blood.

More than three out of four infected adults are baby boomers, the age group now entering Medicare. That health program will spend will spend more than \$9 billion this year on drugs for hepatitis C, according to government estimates released prior to the Senate report.

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