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WEB EXTRAS

Price drop seen with drug cards

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By Larry Lipman, Palm Beach Post-Cox News Service
Monday, May 31, 2004

WASHINGTON -- To hear Bush administration officials tell it, competition among Medicare-approved discount drug cards is causing prescription prices to plummet.

But critics say the process of choosing a card is so arduous and confusing that many elderly and disabled Americans are throwing up their hands in frustration.

Ready or not, the Medicare-approved cards take effect Tuesday.

"When you compare the price of drugs seniors pay at their local pharmacies -- where most seniors prefer to buy their medicines -- the Medicare-approved cards offer real savings," said Health and Human Services Secretary Tommy Thompson.

The cards are offering discounts of 10 percent to 17 percent from the average retail price paid by all Americans for brand-name drugs, according to a report by Medicare's parent agency, the Center for Medicare and Medicaid Services.

Retail prices with some cards are 1 percent to 7 percent below those offered by major Internet drug providers, according to the agency.

But beneficiaries and advocates say it's still too confusing.

"Having 70 cards is befuddling to people," said Judith Stein, executive director of the Center for Medicare Advocacy Inc., a nonprofit education and advocacy organization. "The level of choice can be overwhelming."

Medicare has approved 73 cards so far. Thirty-nine can be purchased nationwide; 33 are available regionally -- Florida has four -- and one is available nationwide only to nursing home residents.

To help beneficiaries choose the best card for them, Medicare last month began posting on its Web site, www.medicare.gov, weekly comparisons of the prices charged with every card for every drug in every participating pharmacy. Critics say that doesn't help many seniors.

"Most of the seniors I know don't have a computer or are not that good using the Internet to get the information they need," said Dr. Timothy McNamee, president of Vero Beach-based Rx Assistance, which helps people connect with drug assistance programs offered by state governments and drug manufacturers.

But Richard Greener, 62, a retired broadcasting executive from Roswell, Ga., said he had no problem navigating the Medicare Web site to find the best deal on 10 of the 16 drugs he takes as a disabled heart patient. Not all of his drugs are covered by a card.

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Greener, who pays about \$600 a month for the drugs listed on the Web site, said the cards would have charged at least \$658 for his drugs during the first week they went on sale this month. Since then, prices have steadily declined. Last week he found a card offering the drugs for \$531.

In addition to the Web site, Medicare increased its customer service staff from 400 to more than 2,000 to handle calls to its 24-hour, seven-days-a-week, toll-free hot line at (800) 633-4227.

Card advocates and critics agree that low-income beneficiaries should sign up for a card soon to take full advantage of Medicare's \$600-a-year subsidy toward drug purchases. The subsidy is available to individuals with income below \$12,569 and couples with income below \$16,862 who do not have any other drug insurance coverage.

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