



HEALTH CARE NEWS

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DRUG PRICE WEBSITE REVEALS CONSUMER DEMAND FOR EASIER PRICE COMPARISONS

Attorney General Eliot Spitzer recently announced that a review of surveys by his office of thousands of pharmacies across the state has revealed that the retail price for commonly prescribed drugs can vary greatly across the state and even within the same community, with the highest surveyed price as much as 17 times the lowest surveyed price.

The review is based on an analysis of six statewide surveys that covered more than 3000 retail pharmacies between July 2004 - March 2005. Spitzer's office has been making prescription prices gleaned from the surveys easily accessible at www.NYAGRx.org. Consumers can search and compare drug prices among surveyed pharmacies in all of New York's 62 counties.

The review of drug price surveys also demonstrated that consumers may not be able to easily compare drug retail price lists and use them effectively to comparison shop and get the lowest price for needed medications. Specifically, the Attorney General's review revealed that:

- In downstate New York, surveyors reported that access to drug price lists was delayed or hindered by long waiting lines at busy pharmacies;
- In upstate New York, especially in rural areas, surveyors noted that long travel distances between pharmacies presented a significant obstacle for consumers, especially seniors and individuals with disabilities;
- Most chain pharmacies surveyed did not use the State Pharmacy Board's format for price listings, making it more challenging to do side-by-side comparisons;



Attorney General Eliot Spitzer addressing AARP's "Rx Watchdogs" in Albany.

- A majority of independent pharmacies scattered across the state used the Pharmacy Board's specified format, but often filled out the prices for the listed drugs by hand, making the list unreadable;
- In many instances, pharmacies did not list the drugs in alphabetical order or failed to list the Board-specified quantities or dosages; and
- Some of the highest price variations within ZIP codes were found in downstate counties including: Bronx, Nassau, Queens, Richmond and Suffolk.

The survey review, however, has uncovered some encouraging data. Specifically, a marked increase in compliance with disclosure laws among the surveyed pharmacies was discovered. The number of pharmacies failing to post signs informing consumers that drug retail prices lists were available upon re-

quest dropped from 20 percent in August 2004, when the first survey results were released, to 0.27 percent in March 2005. In addition, in March 2005, 99.6 percent of surveyed pharmacies readily provided their retail drug price lists upon request.

Since its launch, the website, www.NYAGRx.org has received more than 2.5 million hits. In addition, Spitzer's office has responded to hundreds of letters and phone calls from consumers without access to the Internet, seeking assistance in comparing drug prices at pharmacies. In addition, numerous pharmacists have contacted the Attorney General's office and, citing competitive prices, have asked to be included in the survey, even, at times, volunteering to supply their own drug prices for inclusion in the website data.

Attorney General Eliot Spitzer's Health Care Bureau protects - and advocates for - the rights of all health care consumers statewide. The Bureau operates a Health Care Helpline that assists thousands of New Yorkers with individual problems; investigates and takes law enforcement actions to address systemic problems in the operation of the health care system; and proposes legislation to enhance health care quality and availability in New York State. **To share your views contact the Editor: Rashmi.Vasisht@oag.state.ny.us**