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Mail-order prescription pricing: a critical examination

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The pharmacy benefit manager (PBM) is the company that typically administers the employer's prescription benefit. Researchers at the Creighton University Pharmacy School have earned national recognition for innovative research into the PBM industry. Findings by our research/consulting group suggest the use of **PBM-owned mail order pharmacy may NOT be a "bargain" when compared with community pharmacy**. The tables below contain actual prescription found by our group in corporate benefit plans. The four employers below varied in size from 2,500 to over 30,000 employees.

How we performed this study: Employers often have some employees in a PBM-owned mail order program ("mail") and other employees in a retail pharmacy facility ("community"). For orientation, refer to the first entry for Employer #1. This employer had at least one person who got Atenolol 50mg tabs #90 from the PBM mail order and at least one person who got Atenolol 50mg tabs #90 from the community pharmacy. The prices below represent the TOTAL price of each prescription, before either the patient copayment or the employer payment of the balance. That is, for the first entry, the patient and the member would pay the total $38 charge in mail-order. **Far too many examples show that mail-order prices can be significantly higher than community pharmacy prices.**

Employer 1*

Drug Name & Strength	Quantity	Mail $	Community $	Saving in Community
Atenolol 50 mg	90	$38	$8	$30
Cyclobenzaprine 10 mg	90	$43	$8	$35
Fluoxetine 20 mg	90	$120	$54	$66
Gemfibrozil 600 mg	180	$112	$39	$73
Naproxen 500 mg	180	$117	$33	$84
Temazepam 30 mg	30	$13	$5	$8
Trazodone 50 mg	90	$19	$6	$13
Verapamil 240 mg	90	$73	$32	$41
Minocycline 100 mg	60	$102	$47	$55

Employer 2*

Drug Name & Strength	Quantity	Mail $	Community $	Saving in Community
Alprazolam 0.25 mg	90	$31	$10	$21
Atenolol 100 mg	90	$56	$10	$46
Avandia 8 mg	90	$370	$318	$52
Captopril 50 mg	90	$52	$16	$36
Cyclobenzaprine 10 mg	90	$46	$17	$29
Doxycycl Hyc 100 mg	90	$63	$40	$23
Evista 60 mg	90	$177	$159	$18
Fluoxetine 20 mg Cap	90	$120	$56	$64
Fluoxetine 20 mg Tab	90	$126	$86	$40

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Employer 3*

Drug Name & Strength	Quantity	Mail $	Community $	Saving in Community
Atenolol 25mg	30	$3	$2	$1
Doxazosin 4mg	45	$22	$15	$7
Fluoxetine 20mg	60	$35	$23	$12
Hyoscyamine 0.375mg	30	$17	$8	$9
Klor-Con 10mEq	60	$11	$8	$3
Methylphenidate 10mg	60	$25	$19	$6
Tamoxifen 20mg	30	$61	$35	$26
Timolol 0.5%	10ml	$17	$7	$10
Triam/HCTZ 37.5mg/25mg	60	$19	$13	$6

Employer 4*

Drug Name & Strength	Quantity	Mail $	Community $	Saving in Community
Buspirone 10mg	90	$58	$38	$20
Enalapril 20mg	60	$41	$30	$11
Famotidine 40mg	90	$136	$62	$74
Glipizide 5mg	90	$15	$11	$4
Glyburide 5mg	90	$31	$25	$6
Ibuprofen 800mg	100	$17	$13	$4
Isosorbide Mono. 30mg	90	$45	$22	$23
Metformin 100mg	120	$59	$41	$18
Nortriptyline 50mg	120	$61	$29	$32

*Actual amounts were rounded to protect the anonymity of employers and community pharmacies

Retail versus Mail: Issues to Consider

- ***Diminished patient medication compliance:***
  -Patient compliance with their medication schedules may diminish with the use of mail order since there is no professional consultation to assure correct administration, adverse events monitoring or personal attention to patient concerns.[1,2]

- ***Medication wasting and potential stockpiling prescriptions:***
  The prescription may be changed soon after the 3 month mail supply has been received. This necessitates disposal of the old medication—waste of a large amount. Also, a patient may stockpile old Rx's, potentially increasing problems of overuse or abuse.[3]

- ***Shipping and storage concerns:***
  Uncontrolled temperatures in transit may render the medication less effective, ineffective or dangerous.[4]

- ***Decrease in patient acceptance:***
  Patients may resent the lack of choices with mandatory mail-order. Additional problems are shipping delays, and the absence of interpersonal contact with a pharmacist.[5,6,7]

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