



AP Poll: Almost a third of Americans say paying for drugs is a problem in their families.

WASHINGTON DC (AP) -- Almost a third of Americans say paying for prescription drugs is a problem in their families, and many are cutting dosages to deal with the crunch, according to a poll by The Associated Press.

The Associated Press Poll is conducted by Ipsos-Public Affairs. Between February 16-18, 2004, the AP/Ipsos poll interviewed a representative sample of 1,000 adults nationwide, including 774 registered voters. The margin of error is +/- 3.1 for all adults, +/- 3.6 for registered voters.

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Contact: Thomas Riehle
202-463-7300
thomas.riehle@ipsos-na.com

By WILL LESTER
Associated Press Writer

WASHINGTON DC (AP) -- Like many Americans, Carol Valentine has a monthly prescription drug bill that's more than she can handle for medicine she urgently needs to stay healthy.

Valentine lost her job after having surgery and now faces \$600 to \$700 in drug bills for medications. Without a local clinic's help paying for those drugs, including ones to control her blood pressure and depression, "I'd be dead," said Valentine, a resident of Melbourne, Fla., who is 52 and disabled. "A lot of people I know skip meals because they can't afford medicine."

Almost a third of Americans say paying for prescription drugs is a problem in their families, and many are cutting dosages to deal with the crunch, according to a poll by The Associated Press.

Nearly two-thirds of those surveyed said the government should make it easier to buy cheaper drugs from Canada or other countries.

The poll conducted for the AP by Ipsos-Public Affairs found most Americans either take prescription drugs or someone in their family does. Of those, 33 percent said their families have trouble paying at times. For people having trouble paying their medicine bills, three-fourths say the solution often is to cut back on the dosage.

The high cost of prescription drugs will be an important issue in the presidential campaign, said eight in 10 in the poll. Almost half said it will be "very important."

"This still needs to be dealt with," said Carolyn Keenan, a 57-year-old assistant principal from Gibson Island, Md. "There are a lot of elderly people who do not think they're going to get the help they need."

Congress in November passed a Republican-written Medicare prescription drug benefit that takes effect in 2006. While it will help many seniors pay for medicine, it also increases the role of private insurance in the Medicare system. President Bush signed it into law in early December.

Despite the new law and its \$534 billion cost over the next decade, 52 percent of those polled said Democrats were more likely to make prescription drugs more affordable while 33 percent said Republicans would do better at it.

Two popular steps that could have made prescription drugs more affordable were forbidden by the new law:

- Giving the government authority to negotiate with pharmaceutical companies for lower drug prices, favored by 65 percent.

- Letting Americans import drugs from Canada, Mexico and other countries, an idea supported by 65 percent of those polled for the AP. The Food and Drug Administration opposes the idea, saying that it can't guarantee the safety of imported drugs.

That hasn't stopped people from importing drugs from other countries. Nearly one in eight, 13 percent, said they have done so in the past.

A separate poll by Ipsos-Insights found that 2 percent of those who bought prescription drugs in the last six months have bought medicines from Canada or Mexico and brought them back to this country.

Both Democrats and Republicans have been looking for ways to turn the drug debate to their advantage.

Democrats have sharply criticized gaps where patients have to pick up the entire cost of medicine.

GOP strategists have advised those in their party to emphasize the new benefits rather than other changes in the Medicare program, and to remind people that the changes are voluntary and only a start toward solving a problem affecting many seniors.

The complexity of the new law has left some people confused about whether they approve of it or not.

But the two big steps not taken — allowing imports and negotiating for lower prices — are more understandable than the bill that was passed, said Robert Blendon, an analyst of public opinion on health care.

"The Democrats are going to use this a lot," said Blendon, a Harvard professor of health policy.

Jonathan Stephens, a 32-year-old high school teacher from Lancaster, S.C., said the issue "will be a good topic for debate" in the election campaign, but "it's not going to be a horse they can ride to the White House on."

The AP-Ipsos poll of 1,000 adults was conducted Feb. 16-18 and has a margin of sampling error of plus or minus 3 percentage points.

Ipsos Public Affairs

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