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Washington Merry-Go-Round by JACK ANDERSON

WASHINGTON - The great, greedy pharmaceutical firms soak the poor, the elderly and other patients up to 30 times too much for life-saving drugs. These staggering overcharges are collected for brand-name drugs which are no more efficacious than generic drugs, with the same ingredients but no ballyhooed brand names.

These are the conclusions of a confidential study by the Senate Small Business Subcommittee. Chairman Gaylord Nelson, D - Wis., is expected to release the findings shortly.

There's no use, Nelson discovered, grumbling to the druggists, who are compelled to pay proportionately high prices for the big-brand drugs. Why, then, don't the druggists refuse to handle the costly products and offer the same drugs under non-brand names? Answers the Nelson study:

"The purchase of prescription drugs by 200 million people in the United States is controlled by 200,000 physicians...\$5,000 is being spent each year on each practicing doctor to persuade him to prescribe brand-name products.

"Since in most states no other brand of drug can be legally substituted for another, if the doctor prescribes a brand-name drug, competition has been eliminated." In other words, the druggists have no choice.

Sometimes, Nelson found, Americans pay almost three times more for their drugs than foreigners pay for the same drug produced by the same companies. Prices are based, according to the study, on what the "traffic will bear."

Nelson's 40-drug study shows that Bristol-Myers, for example, charges U.S. wholesalers \$35.16 for the same antibiotics that the company sold for only \$17 for overseas use. And a 500-pill lot of Travenol's Synthroid costs \$6.28 in the U.S., only \$2.44 overseas.

Even more outrageous is the way the companies jack up the prices of brand-name drugs. For the drug Peritrate, produced by Warner-Chilcott, aging heart patients must pay \$62 for 1,000

tablets at many drug stores. The non-brand equivalent sells at the same drug stores for only \$2.91.

Ciba's Serpasil, widely used to reduce hypertension in the aged, sells at \$65.83 - per - thousand at the drug stores. Its non-brand competitor, Reserpine, costs \$2.25. As evidence that Ciba could make a profit at the lower price, Nelson reports the company once offered the same drug to the Defense Department in mass quantities for a mere 60 cents per thousand.

The Committee to Re-Elect the President established a national "letter writing network" which continued even after the election to flood newspapers with letters praising the President and lambasting his critics.

His conservative critics weren't spared in the letters-to-editors campaign. Conservative columnist William Buckley, for example, annoyed the President by criticizing the detente with Communist China. Out went a draft, which the "letter writing network" was invited to use as a model for bombarding newspapers.

"Ideologically obsessed, with rigid mind and inflexible attitudes, William Buckley sounds like a political Elmer Gantry with his righteous outbursts against the 'Chinese (communist) devils,'" the letter writers were instructed to say. "Buckley has no trouble

supporting rightist dictators, from Spain to Greece to Brazil, but he appears mentally incapable of recognizing that under Mao the lives of the Chinese masses have been greatly improved.

"Buckley doesn't seem to care that before 1949 the average peasant had no house, almost no clothing and never enough food, that he was exploited ruthlessly and died young.

"Buckley is not offering the 'conservative' view of China... What Buckley gives is a radical, evangelical hysteria centered in the old Manichaeian theory of absolute good and evil."

The same letter writers, who were asked to attack Buckley for his anti-Mao Tse-tung views, were also instructed to write letters protesting the ouster of the Chiang Kai-shek government from the United Nations.

Letters to editors were stimulated on a variety of issues from the Vietnam War to wage-price controls. The President's campaign committee prepared a

blast, for example, at Rep. John Ashbrook, the Ohio conservative, for criticizing the President's fiscal policies.

The letter writers were urged to protest: "How would Mr. Ashbrook maintain his desired fiscal black ink? By raising taxes, or cutting back public employment programs, or reducing benefits to the unemployed?"

As late as January 25, 1973, long after the President was safely re-elected, the campaign committee urged the "letter writing network" to stimulate mail congratulating the President on the Vietnam cease-fire.

"Let's give him thanks, PUBLICLY, in a Letter to the Editor -- of two or three papers!" the letter writers were urged. "And get two or three other people to write, too. There are always lots of voices telling the President what he's doing wrong - let's congratulate him for doing a very big thing - RIGHT!!!"