



January 18, 2009

## Deeply Discounted Generic Drugs

*Bob Hoyt MD*

*Reader Submitted*

Prescription drugs account for 11% of healthcare spending in the United States so improving your drug IQ is important. Brand name drugs are protected by a patent for 7 to 10 years and then become available for much less money as a generic drug. In 2007 sixty seven percent of the 3.8 billion prescriptions written were for generic drugs, yet 84% of the expenditures were for brand name drugs. Furthermore, the United States pays more for its brand name drugs than any other country. In order to decrease healthcare spending, we need to do a better job promoting the use of generic drugs to patients and physicians.

With the declining economy all patients will be seeking ways to decrease healthcare costs. It is estimated that for every 1% increase in unemployment there will be 1.1 million patients who lose health insurance.

The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) determined that generic drugs are chemically and therapeutically equivalent. An article in the December 2008 Journal of the American Medical Association reviewed the safety and effectiveness of generic drugs for cardiovascular conditions. They concluded that generic medications used in these circumstances are safe and clinically equivalent. Nevertheless, patients and physicians are sometimes skeptical about generics, in spite of their excellent safety record.

In 2006 Walmart introduced about 150 medications for \$4 monthly. Shortly thereafter Target offered the same deal. In July 2008, Walmart offered a three month supply of drugs for \$10. Since then, Target as well as other major pharmacy chains such as CVS, Rite Aid and Walgreens have followed suit. As an example, the popular drug Zocor for elevated cholesterol costs \$135 a month as a brand name, \$28 a month as the generic drug simvastatin and \$4 a month as a deeply discounted generic. The selection of deeply discounted generic drugs is excellent with more than 35 drugs available just for hypertension. Deeply discounted drugs are an excellent deal, particularly for those without health insurance or Medicare patients who fall into the "donut hole".

Many patients and physicians are not aware of these recent generic bargains. The author polled a group of about 100 physicians on a well known physician's blog and 43% were unaware that many popular medications were now available for as little as \$4 monthly. There is no method in place to notify patients or physicians when brand name drugs are available as a generic drug and whether they fall into this new category "deeply discounted". In addition, although many of the drugs offered by the pharmacy chains are similar, they may vary by drug, price, or supply. For instance, there are three important drugs (statins) offered for the treatment of high cholesterol but no one pharmacy offers all three.

The Medical Informatics program at the University of West Florida created a free web site [www.genericmedsearch.com](http://www.genericmedsearch.com) that searches 8 of the major pharmacy chains for deeply discounted generics. Pharmacies included are Walmarts-Sams Club, Targets, CVS, Walgreens, Rite Aid, Ralphs, Krogers and Giant. A patient or physician can search by brand name or generic name to see if a drug is available and where. We also included three pharmacies like Publix that offer a limited number of free antibiotics. Educational information about drugs in general and generics specifically can be found on the site.

Deeply discounted generic drugs could be the good news we hear so rarely today. We need to get the word out.

---