

Prescription drug help is available

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Newhouse News Service

It may be one of the best-kept secrets in health care: If you can't afford name-brand prescription medicines, they are available free directly from the manufacturer.

The catch is that many consumers don't know it.

At a time when rising drug prices are causing more commotion than ever, big pharmaceutical companies are giving away billions of dollars' worth of free medicines to Americans who lack health coverage and have limited incomes.

But critics, including watchdog groups and some doctors, say companies don't do enough to publicize these programs, and patients often must go to great lengths to find out about programs that vary from company to company. Even some in the industry — notably Schering-Plough Chief Executive Fred Hassan — acknowledge the sys-

GETTING ASSISTANCE

A list of drug companies and eligibility requirements is available. **8E**

tem needs an overhaul.

"The people who would benefit the most are the least likely to be aware of them," said Daniel Rosan, program director at the Interfaith Center for Corporate Responsibility in New York, a shareholder group that has been lobbying drug companies for years to increase giveaways and cut drug prices.

A survey of the nation's 15 largest drug makers by *The Star-Ledger* newspaper of Newark, N.J., found they gave away medicines valued at \$3.2 billion last year. The companies contend these donations function well as a program of last resort for patients.

"We do promote them actively," said Rick Luftglass, Pfizer's director of U.S. philanthropy.

"The fact that we reached 1.2 mil-

**Included in
the
giveaways
are the top
20 selling
drugs.**

worth of drugs last year.

Schering-Plough, with a fraction of Pfizer's sales, and serious business problems, gave away more than \$200 million.

These figures are wholesale prices, which are lower than retail prices.

They don't include giveaways overseas, such as free AIDS medicines in Africa.

Nor do they include medicines provided at reduced fees under drug

lion patients does bear out the fact we are getting the word out. ... We enroll as many eligible patients as we can."

Pfizer, the world's biggest drug maker, gave away half a billion dollars