

# DIOCESAN NEWS

## Program offers savings on prescription costs

By Jennifer Ficaglia  
Assistant Editor

In January 2001, just a few months before he turned 65, it dawned on Charlie Bell that he would soon lose his prescription drug coverage.

The loss of that coverage meant having to come up with \$6,000 out of pocket each year in order to pay for the medications he needed. And he knew he couldn't afford it.

Many senior citizens find themselves in a similar situation, Bell said. Upon retirement, they receive health-insurance packages that include prescription drug coverage, but the coverage expires once they turn 65.

"They don't want to pay the price (of seniors' medications)," he said of former employers.

Bell decided to take matters into his own hands. He began shopping around for the best prescription drug prices, and in doing so decided to check out prices in Canada. That's when he got a surprise — he could save \$4,000 a year on his prescription drug costs if he purchased his medications in Niagara Falls, Ontario, rather than in Rochester.

"I couldn't believe it," Bell said. "I think God led me (to Canada)."

To prove a point, Bell picked up the telephone during his interview with the *Courier* and called a local pharmacy. He asked for the prices of one-year supplies of Tamoxifen, a breast-cancer drug, and Glucophage, a diabetes medication. He was quoted prices of \$2,895.69 for Tamoxifen and \$1,391.69 for Glucophage.

Bell then logged on to the Internet to check out Canadian drug prices at a reputable Web site. The same one-year supply of Tamoxifen cost \$212.24 in American currency, and the one-year supply of Glucophage cost \$238.28. That's an annual savings of \$2,683.45 and \$1,153.41, respectively.

"They wonder why people ... can't (afford) to take their medications," Bell said. "They're not only fighting for their life, they're fighting to (pay for) their medicine."

Once Bell found that prescription drugs were significantly less expensive in Canada — and that the Canadian medications were manufactured by American pharmaceutical companies — he wanted to share the cost savings with others in his situation. So he began exploring ways to help himself and other Rochesterians legally take advantage of this savings. He spoke with officials at Canada's Bureau of Pharmacy and the U.S. Border Patrol for details on how to buy prescription drugs in Canada and ship them to the U.S. Bell learned that Canadian doctors are able to rewrite American prescriptions so they can be filled in Canadian pharmacies. And to avoid travel to Canada, he also learned that the medications and subsequent refills could be mailed to the U.S. without any problems.



Karin von Voigtlander/Staff photographer  
**Webster's Charlie Bell, who founded Medicine Express to help people save on prescriptions, displays some of his medications in his home July 16.**

Turning this knowledge into practice was a challenge, Bell said. He had a tough time finding a Canadian doctor willing to rewrite prescriptions. In making his rounds to Niagara Falls medical offices, he found that Americans' reputation for litigiousness expanded well beyond its borders — Canadian doctors refused to help Bell for fear of being sued. But after several trips to Canada and many hours of pounding the pavement, Bell finally found a group of doctors willing to help. They, too, feared being sued, but said if each person who wanted prescriptions rewritten paid them an annual \$95 fee, they could carry additional liability insurance and would perform the service.

Bell agreed, and in August of 2001 the Medicine Express program was born.

Bell offers Medicine Express membership for free to anyone who has no or insufficient prescription drug coverage.

Those who wish to participate need to obtain from Bell forms that must be filled out by their physicians. Along with the completed forms, physicians should also include prescriptions for three-month supplies of medications plus three refills. Participants then give Bell the forms, prescriptions and separate money orders for the \$95 annual fee to the Canadian doctors and a \$45 annual fee to the Canadian mail carrier that delivers the prescriptions to Canada. Those who are able to travel to Canada to be examined by the Canadian physician have the option to do so, while those who cannot are not required to.

Bell said he could very well charge people to be members of Medicine Express, but he chooses not to, viewing it as a ministry God called him to. He said he spends about \$1,500 a year of his own money overseeing the program, and said he will continue to do so until he dies.

"That's a small price to pay when people are saving thousands of dollars," Bell said.

He has been thankful that some members of the community have shown support for the program, donating printing supplies for flyers and equipment for presentations. He's thankful in particular to Dr. Clinton Strickland, principal of Rochester's Edison Technical & Occupational Education Center, and the school's printing technology teacher Christian Claydon, who print Medicine Express materials for free. He is also grateful to state Sen. Jim Alesi, R-Perinton, and state Assemblyman David Koon, D-Perinton, who have both thrown their support behind his endeavors.

"I couldn't do it without them," Bell said.

And Bernice Rinebold, a parishioner at St. Mary's in Rochester, says she couldn't afford her prescriptions without Bell and Medicine Express. Rinebold said becoming a member of the program will translate into a \$3,000 annual savings on the cost of prescriptions for migraines and asymptomatic Crohns disease.

Rinebold said she has prescription drug coverage through Preferred Care Gold, which pays 50 percent of her prescription costs up to \$1,000. But her medications are expensive, and in 2001 alone she spent \$7,000 out of pocket for prescriptions.

"I blew my coverage by the time June rolled around," she said.

In the spring of 2002, Rinebold called Bell and became a Medicine Express member. She's been enjoying a cost savings ever since.

"It's well worth it," Rinebold said of being a Medicine Express member. "It's a sizeable savings. You can't afford not to do it. God bless Charlie Bell."

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EDITOR'S NOTE: For more information on Medicine Express, call Charlie Bell at 585/671-0916 or visit [www.meds-ex.com](http://www.meds-ex.com).

## Parish helps needy Filipinos

By Jennifer Burke  
Editorial intern

When Father Jim Hewes of St. John Parish in Clyde opened his morning newspaper one day last fall, he saw an article that sickened him.

Instead of turning the page quickly, he was moved to take action. As a result, needy Catholic families in the Philippines will receive at least \$16,000 in aid.

The article that had such an affect on Father Hewes detailed the collapse of a garbage pile in Manila. The accident killed 31 people of a poor community whose members build shanties in the dump and earn their living by picking through the garbage. Father Hewes said he was not only shocked that people died while doing this, but that they lived in those conditions.

"The thing with this is that it just seems so inhuman that people should die because they're living that by a garbage dump," Father Hewes said. "People should not have to live in such dehumanizing conditions. That's just not human, let alone Christian."

Father Hewes said he was so distressed after reading the article that he wanted to learn how he could assist the Filipinos.

"I wanted to find out if there was anybody helping and how I could help," he noted.

Father Hewes contacted several charitable organizations around the country, eventually finding that only one group, the Religious of the Virgin Mary's Mother Ignacia National Social Apostolate Center, is assisting the poor families. This group,

in turn, is being supported by Catholic Charities of Edmonton, Alberta, Canada. Once Father Hewes found out who was helping, he took the matter to his parish council.

"St. John is a small rural parish with people for the most part on limited incomes," he said. "That is why I was so proud of our parish council, which committed \$4,000 to help the people of the Payatas garbage community."

Father Hewes felt so strongly about the cause that he took \$4,000 from his own limited savings to match the parish's donation. The contributions didn't stop there, however. The Wild Rose Foundation of Alberta has agreed to match donations to the cause on a dollar-for-dollar basis. That makes for a total donation of \$16,000 so far.

Father Hewes has also sent a letter to 35 pastors in the Rochester Diocese, explaining the tragedy and asking them to join the cause. He also sent letters to local lawmakers and even to President Bush.

"We're spending money to equip the military, and we keep increasing our defense budget and there's people without their basic needs being met," Father Hewes said. "I'm trying to write to anybody I can to see who can help. They're our Catholic brothers and sisters. They shouldn't have to live like that."

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EDITOR'S NOTE: For more information on relief efforts, contact Father Hewes at 315/923-3941 or Msgr. Bill Irwin of Catholic Charities of Edmonton, Alberta, Canada, at 780/432-1137.

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