IMPORTING INJECTABLES

There are numerous ways to decrease the cost of toxins and fillers, including importing materials from another country and using less expensive materials, but the results achieved with such products may be less than optimal.

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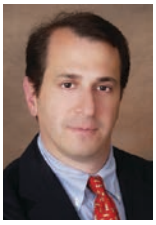

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As the commoditization of toxins and fillers accelerates and the recognition of the person driving the needle diminishes, cosmetic procedures are becoming increasingly subject to pricing pressures. In response to these pressures, several businesses have begun to offer less expensive alternatives to the toxins and fillers offered by authorized sources in the United States. Although not a new phenomenon, the recent resurgence warrants mention.

Solicitations via e-mail, fax and postal mail all attempt to build market share with a host of products that are, at best, illegally imported and, at worst, counterfeit. Unfortunately, patients frequently do not care or know to ask about the source of the product being inserted into their bodies, and are more interested in just knowing the cost. As a result, the incentive for decreasing the cost of material increases.

ISSUES WITH PURCHASING PRODUCTS FROM UNAUTHORIZED VENDORS

One common way to decrease the cost of products is simply by purchasing them from vendors outside the traditional pathways. For physicians who are large consumers of products like Botox, Dysport, Restylane, Perlane, Radiesse and Sculptra, this can result in savings of tens of thousands of dollars. These savings not only allow practices to be more profitable; they also enable them to compete with the providers who charge $200 for injections. However, there is a lack of understanding on the part of patients about the health risks presented by these products and on the part of physicians about the various legal issues surrounding their use. Although programs involving "good purchasing" certification and patient education about unauthorized product purchases were contemplated by several corporations, none were ever implemented. As a result, patients have no way to know who is and is not purchasing authentic products, and injectors have little reason not to avoid expensive, legitimate channels.

PATIENT SAFETY CONCERNS

For those who purchase product through secondary channels, there are two distinct avenues. The first involves buying the same product from another country where it is approved. It is beyond my knowledge to consider the legality of such transactions, but, from a patient care perspective, this provides products that are safe and approved for use in the United States, albeit from a channel that is not. Healthcare reform has created alternate channels for drug purchases for individuals, and pharmacies to the north and south of the border have been taking advantage of this pricing discrepancy.

The second avenue does not involve purchasing the same product and instead involves drugs and devices that are either counterfeit or otherwise tainted. Obviously, as reported recently in the *Wall Street Journal*, this practice has significant consequences for patients who rely on their doctors for drugs to treat various conditions, including cancer. However, there is also a potential risk for patients receiving cosmetic treatments. Whether it is a botulinum toxin

injection or a dermal implant, a material is being injected into the skin. Counterfeit toxin may be derived from a research-grade material or may be a product that is manufactured to look like the real thing. In the best-case scenario, this is inert material. However, in the worst case, this may contain harmful chemicals or other impurities. When impurities create fillers that are not sterile or that contain permanent filling material, the consequences can be devastating. Finally, as other countries gain the ability to make toxins, they have been able to produce products that have biologic effects, and substitution of these products may be harmful if they are stronger than the label indicates.

PRODUCT QUALITY MATTERS

A third method for decreasing the price of cosmetic products is to use a different product. With the advent of multiple types of botulinum toxins and fillers, it is likely that injectors trying to cut costs will use less expensive products. These may not be inferior but are simply discounted based on volume or because of promotions. In general, newer products will have lower prices in order to gain market share.

While not harmful to the patient, the practice of substitution is disingenuous at best. In my practice, I had a patient complain about a decreased duration of efficacy from treatment with a filler; once we obtained the records for the procedure, it was discovered that the patient had been injected with a low-density, inexpensive filler but had been told it was something else.

The lack of branding of the person performing these types of procedures has led to a demand for treatments that are based solely on price. As pricing pressure increases, patients are seeking less expensive treatments, which has forced some injectors to dilute products or substitute with cheaper materials.

In cases where products are diluted, patients get less than they bargained for. However, when counterfeit materials are used, they may get much more. The price paid can be quite high. The savings aren't always worth the consequences. ■

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Disclosure: Dr. Beer is an owner of Theraplex LLC, and consults, speaks or performs clinical trials for Medicis, a division of Valeant, 3M, Sanofi Aventis, Bioform Medical, Allergan and Stiefel, a GSK company. He is also a Director of the Cosmetic Bootcamp meeting.