

Now, these pharmacy committees, through these therapeutic committees—

Senator NELSON. But you are, in fact, spending substantial amounts of the taxpayers' money to buy drugs which the best medical experts say there is an equivalent at a much cheaper price than the one being bought—or that the one being bought has no effectiveness at all.

Mr. JOHNSON. But this has come about, sir, largely as a result of good legislation which allowed us to give that veteran the kind of service in the local community to which the Congress thought, and I believe correctly, he is entitled. And yet, yet we have the problem of the matter of the professionalism and infringing here and how much direction we can give to the private physician or general practitioner as to exactly what he should prescribe.

At this point, if he comes in, as was stated earlier for an emergency filling of a prescription, it is filled, but at every opportunity we have, we make that doctor aware of the list that we have and we use and recommend.

Dr. HABER. Senator, may I make two points with respect to VA's practice of irrational prescription, which I think may have some bearing here?

One is the fact that even though the Medical Letter may point out that a drug has, in their opinion, limited effectiveness, the Medical Letter is not above errors in the past, either.

I am merely trying to indicate that the bulk of medical opinion does change. Several years ago it was a rare physician who did not believe that you could affect the course of diabetes by prescribing oral hypoglycemic drugs.

Now, some ten years after they have been introduced in the market there is serious question as to whether they have, indeed, been serving our patients well by the broad use of these drugs, so that there has to be always, at some time a dissenting body of physicians whom we come to grips with at some point.

The second thing I would like to point out is we also do not always serve the taxpayer best by concern for his dollar at the moment, in the sense that sometimes long-range effectiveness of drugs turns out to be more important than immediate economies. The history of the Veterans' Administration in the treatment of tuberculosis, I think, is an excellent example. The conquest of tuberculosis in this country is due in no small measure to the effective use of these drugs in large scale programs in the Veterans' Administration.

At the time there was considerable question about the expense of these drugs because their efficacy had not been widely demonstrated, yet the VA did demonstrate it.

Tuberculosis has dropped in preeminence as a killer of patients to one I think now in 12th to 13th place, so again in the long run of the story it is sometimes more important than the most immediate economies which can be effected.

Senator NELSON. We are not really talking about that kind of case. We are talking about the cases that I have cited, and there are a number of them, where well-established drugs are in the marketplace, for example phenobarbital, and a new expensive drug is put