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Grass roots -- bought, paid for

Drug makers fight Medicaid cutbacks

By AMY GARDNER, Staff Writer

Doctors, church leaders, and consumers across North Carolina are getting calls and letters seeking their support in a lobbying effort aimed at protecting Medicaid patients' access to prescription drugs.

But what's going unsaid in a campaign led by The Consumer Alliance, a self-described public-interest group from Lansing, Mich., is that the national trade group of drug manufacturers is bankrolling the effort -- and that a private telemarketing firm is helping coordinate it.

The campaign is drawing complaints from state officials and North Carolina consumer advocates, who say that The Consumer Alliance is not what it claims to be and that drug companies are trying to pass off their own battle to protect their bottom line as grass-roots opposition from consumers.

"It really is revolting to me," said Adam Searing, project director of the N.C. Health Access Coalition, an advocacy group for the poor. "I deal with the tactics of big business all the time at the General Assembly, and I have dealt with it with the insurance industry. But to pretend to care about the poor when you just care about lining your own pockets I think is just deceitful. It gives everyone who is fighting for poor people a bad name."

Drug manufacturers have a huge stake in Medicaid, the state's \$6.7 billion-a-year health program for the poor. State officials, facing a budget shortfall for the second year in a row, are trying to rein in Medicaid's costs, and the \$1 billion prescription drug program is on their list.

Health officials recently decided to require doctors to obtain permission from Medicaid before prescribing certain high-priced drugs. The program, which went into effect two weeks ago, requires prior approval for 11 categories of drugs, including those used to treat attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder, the pain reliever OxyContin and anti-inflammatory drugs such as Vioxx, Celebrex and Bextra.

Drug manufacturers have been fighting prior approval for months, lobbying state health officials and legislators to leave doctors alone to prescribe the medications they believe are best for their patients.

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Chuck Wilson, a Greenville pediatrician and a clinical professor at East Carolina University's medical school, was one of the doctors who received The Consumer Alliance letter urging him to oppose changes in Medicaid's prescription drug program.

"I wouldn't classify any action by the pharmaceutical industry to be 'grass-roots,'" Wilson said. "The industry, as you can tell by the elaborate advertisements on TV and radio, is quite sophisticated about getting information to the public that it wants the public to know. It wants the public to demand high-priced medicines when they go to the doctor's office to help improve the bottom line."

The Rev. Joseph C. Brown Sr., pastor of St. Luke African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church in Wilmington, got the following pitch: "Religious leaders -- like you -- are needed to join with consumer groups -- like ours -- from across North Carolina to ask the governor and our legislature to protect North Carolina's poor, who are sick and need the medicines their doctors think will best help relieve their suffering and help them recover from illness."

Brown was intrigued at first, but suspicious when he couldn't trace The Consumer Alliance. After a bit of digging, he decided to throw the letter away.

"It can't be self-serving," Brown said. "It has to be genuine. I'm not saying that this group's concerns aren't genuine. But I do feel that there needs to be some concerted grass-roots efforts from churches and community-based groups."

Carmen Hooker Odom, who heads the state's Department of Health and Human Services, also objected to the group's characterizations and has written a letter protesting its efforts.

"I certainly don't want to characterize the pharmaceutical industry as the enemy of the people," said Hooker Odom. "That is not a helpful approach to take. But we would never, ever implement anything if we believed people would suffer and die the way it is being characterized and that they would lose access to life-saving therapy."

Donald J. Rounds, who heads The Consumer Alliance, said in a phone interview from Michigan on Monday that his group is a legitimate consumer organization with a genuine concern for Medicaid patients.

By all accounts a consumer advocate for more than 20 years, Rounds said his organization has members in about 30 states and tends to target issues at the request of state-level members. But when asked who made him aware of North Carolina's Medicaid debate, he couldn't name any organization, and refused to name any North Carolina members of his organization.

Rounds said Pharmaceutical Research and Manufacturers of America, or PhRMA (pronounced FAR-ma), is paying him to run the campaign. And he said PhRMA also is financing the work of the private telemarketing firm that has coordinated hundreds of telephone calls to the Governor's Office and state Department of Health and Human Services.

"I have received money from the pharmaceutical industry to underwrite the expense from the project," Rounds said. "We're a tiny little consumer group. We can't afford to do this ourselves."

Bruce Lott, a spokesman for PhRMA, said there is nothing misleading about

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this campaign, and noted that PhRMA actually announced the multistate effort to The Wall Street Journal, which described it in a recent article.

Lott also said PhRMA's name appears on much of the correspondence sent out. PhRMA's name does not appear on any of the copies of letters obtained by The News & Observer.

"We are very concerned that if you limit patients' access to the medicines that their doctors say they need, if you deny a Medicaid patient, who is potentially the most vulnerable of patients in any state, if you deny the medicine that doctors say they need, then you are potentially hurting this patient," Lott said.

It is not unusual for private industry to team up with public-interest groups to push for or oppose particular legislation.

Beth Melcher, who heads the North Carolina chapter of the National Alliance for the Mentally Ill, said her group receives funding from the drug manufacturing industry because both want mentally ill patients to have sufficient access to anti-psychotic drugs.

But Melcher noted that nonprofits are limited in the amount of money they may spend lobbying. The Consumer Alliance, which is not a nonprofit but a limited-liability corporation, is not required to adhere to that restriction.

"It's something that every organization struggles with," Melcher said. "We limit the funds that we receive from pharmaceutical companies to help underwrite a big education conference, so that we don't ever feel like our agenda is compromised."

Staff writer Amy Gardner can be reached at 829-8902 or agardner@newsobserver.com.

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