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\$4 drugs come to California

By **KEN CARLSON**
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Wal-Mart Stores began selling \$4 prescription drugs Tuesday at its 189 pharmacies in California, including its stores in the Northern San Joaquin Valley and Sierra foothills.

California and 10 other states were among the final states included in the retailer's discount program, first offered at Wal-Mart pharmacies in Florida in September. Four dollars buys a 30-day supply of generic drugs on Wal-Mart's discount list, which now has 331 prescription drugs.

Last week, in response to Wal-Mart, Target Corp. started offering \$4 prescriptions at its pharmacies in California and 46 other states.

Billie Ann McClintick of Modesto said she went to the Wal-Mart on Plaza Parkway on Tuesday after a chain drugstore quoted a \$20 price for a medication used by her 91-year-old aunt. She got it for \$4 at the Wal-Mart pharmacy.

She said she thinks Wal-Mart's price-slashing will drive down the costs of drugs.

"I think it is good for competition," she said. "I would think that the other stores would want to stay competitive."

Store officials said the Modesto Wal-Mart received numerous inquiries Tuesday from customers seeking information about the \$4 prescriptions.

Wal-Mart pharmacist Jeff Doerman said a woman called the pharmacy to ask if her cholesterol medication, which costs \$159, was on the list of \$4 prescriptions. It wasn't, but Doerman suggested she ask her doctor if Pravastatin, a drug that is on the list, would be as effective in controlling her cholesterol.

According to a price sheet, the brand-name version of Pravastatin retails for \$109.

Drug prices all over the board

Escalon farmer Vern Paddack brought a list of his medicines to the pharmacy's window after getting a lesson in the verities of drug pricing. He said one chain store quoted a price of \$60 for a drug called Terazosin; it's \$12 at Costco.

"I am going to find out if they have it for \$4," said Paddack, who has no insurance and pays \$200 a month for drugs. Wal-Mart and Target offer Terazosin for \$4.

The \$4 prescriptions at Wal-Mart and Target represent a small percentage of the generic drugs that a drugstore normally has in stock.

Wal-Mart's list consists of about 140 drugs in different formulations. About 50 of the 331 prescriptions can't be sold for \$4 in California because of a law prohibiting retailers from selling products below cost.

Wal-Mart pharmacies are selling many of those prescriptions for \$4-plus to \$9, Doerman said.

Some customers taking advantage of the discounts were insured individuals who have their prescriptions filled at Wal-Mart pharmacies, store officials said. In processing those prescriptions, pharmacy computers default either to the patient's copayment or the discount price, whatever is lower, store officials said.

Critics of the Wal-Mart program say the retailer is selling the drugs at a loss to lure customers into its stores and help with its public image.

"They are hoping to make up their losses when the customers buy more shampoo and suntan lotion," said Michael Negrete, chief executive officer of the Pharmacy Foundation, a nonprofit group tied to the California Pharmacists Association.

He expressed concern that the discount programs reinforce a notion that prescription drugs are a commodity. That can create an environment where medication errors can become more prevalent, he contended.

He said the drug's price should be weighed against the oversight and attention customers receive from pharmacists at traditional drugstores.

"With prescription drugs there is more to think about than cost and convenience," Negrete said. "If you focus your attention on the cost of the prescription, it becomes less apparent that these are powerful substances that should not be taken lightly."

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ON THE NET

For a list of low-cost drugs provided by Wal-Mart, go to www.walmartfacts.com/articles/4627.aspx.

For Target's list, go to to http://sites.target.com/images/pharmacy/4dollar_program_list_112806.pdf.

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