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By Senator Mike Enzi (R-Wyoming)

As I began to work on this article a friend of mine offered that writing about an issue that still had so much Committee work and floor activity before it was a lot like writing the review of a play during Intermission. Sure, a lot of the characters have been introduced and the plot lines have been developed, but most of the real substantive work is still to come in Act II.

So it is with the issue of drug importation. Most of the characters involved in the issue have been identified and taken their positions on stage. The plot line has begun to unwind and it continues to develop through the action taken – or threatened to be taken – by our state governments, by the courts, and by the American consumer.

Clearly, we have become victims of our own technology. Research laboratories have spent years producing and developing drugs and medications to treat just about every ailment or illness known to man. We have pursued not only the treatment but the prevention of disease to a degree far beyond anything our ancestors could have ever imagined. We have achieved great success that has made us the envy of the world. Now our final frontier is to see if we can make these medical miracles affordable and within the reach of those who need them the most. After all, what good does it do to develop a miracle drug if those who need it the most can't afford to buy it?

It is a daunting challenge not unlike that posed in a recent book called *The Perfect Storm*. In that book the forces of Mother Nature come together at the right place and the right time to produce a storm of epic proportions.

Here, similarly powerful forces have come together to produce a battle between the forces of consumer demand, the possibilities of modern information technology, and the need for more specific market regulation on an issue that is already causing a storm of controversy.

As the newly elected Chairman of the Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee, it will be up to me and my colleagues on the Committee to study the proposals that have been presented and determine the best way to address the issues involved – which are many and all too complicated and complex to dismiss without the thoughtful consideration and review they deserve.

In the weeks to come the Committee will be holding hearings and reviewing the testimony of experts in the field, concerned citizens and consumers groups, and the relevant agencies of the federal government to find answers to questions like:

Supply – is there enough in the world's supply of pharmaceuticals to satisfy the demands of American consumers and still keep prices low?

Regulation – who will be in charge of evaluating foreign labs and ensuring American consumers of the reliability of the drugs and medications they will order?

Cost – in the end, is the money that consumers will save worth establishing the oversight that will be needed to ensure the system runs effectively and efficiently?

Prescription Drug Act – If enacted, what effect will a drug importation package have on the Prescription Drug benefit Congress passed last year?

Competition – will a drug importation policy increase competition and lower prices or increase demand and raise them to a point where drug costs are almost the same as they are right now?

Volume – if we allow consumers to import drugs from foreign countries – how many will? And – what impact will it have on our own market here in the United States?

Safety – are foreign laboratories adhering to standards that are comparable to American labs?

Liability – who is responsible and who will be liable in the event a medication isn't as labeled or as marketed?

FDA - what should their role and responsibility be, if any at all, if the task and possible risk turns out to be immense?

These are just a few of the questions we must answer before we act.

Clearly, we have our work cut out for us. It is a difficult task but I am confident the Committee will find the answers we need to address this issue. Studies have shown that consumers want the ability to import their drugs from foreign sources – Canada and overseas. The Committee will have to determine if the reward – increased choice – is worth the increased risk to consumer health – if there is any.

Stay tuned. Act II is where it all gets really interesting!

Senator Enzi is Chairman of the Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions.