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Unauthorized practices

The spouse who borrowed her husband's pills to treat her blood pressure was clearly taking a risk. But when many patients cannot afford a drug bill of over \$500 (£271; €397) a month and may depend on drug samples, issues such as using drugs beyond their official expiry date become increasingly relevant. Though strictly speaking unauthorized, it has long been a common practice among doctors, as shown by the daughter of a southern practitioner who declared she was "brought up on grits and expired medicines."

Hard data on this subject are difficult to come by. Insulin and nitroglycerin need to be fresh, as do most liquid preparations; and outdated tetracycline was notorious for causing a Fanconi syndrome. But for other drugs a study conducted some years ago by the Food and Drug Administration at the request of the US army, which had large stores of unused expensive medications, found that most of them were safe and effective, some even after 15 years. Other studies have found that some drugs may lose 10% of their efficacy, which is mostly clinically inconsequential.

Also controversial is the issue of splitting pills, an economy practice arising largely from the fact that for several medications all dosage forms cost the same. Studies by the Veterans Administration and by Stanford University have confirmed the safety of pill splitting, and several health plans now offer discounts to members who agree to split their pills. More recently several government agencies as well as Kaiser Permanente have mandated splitting certain expensive pills, to the displeasure of drug makers, pharmacy associations, and a trial lawyers' organization.

To split pills most patients use a knife or a pill splitter, but some break them by hand or even use their teeth. Clearly patients with dementia, visual impairment, or tremors should not attempt this delicate operation; nor can delayed release pills be bisected without disrupting their mechanism. Other pills, such as the phosphodiesterase inhibitors, cannot be easily split evenly without their fragments occasionally hitting the dining room walls. Yet many patients oppressed by rising costs would rather accept this occasional mishap than pay \$14 for a few minutes' exaltation.