

Bill to Change Contact Lens Access

Jim Abrams - AP Online

Nov. 19, 2003

WASHINGTON (AP) - Eye doctors would be required to provide contact lens patients with their prescriptions, making it easier for consumers to shop for the best prices, under legislation the House passed Wednesday.

Since 1978, eyeglass wearers have had the right to get their prescriptions from eye care providers, but in many states that right has not been extended to people with contact lenses. Without that information, people have been forced to buy their lenses from the prescribing optometrists or ophthalmologists, often at a higher price than might be available elsewhere, said Rep. Richard Burr, R-N.C., sponsor of the bill.

"This is an important consumer rights issue," said Rep. **Jan Schakowsky**, D-Ill. With it, consumers "will have the freedom to shop around and find the best deal possible."

The bill would prohibit a prescribing doctor from charging a fee for providing a copy of the prescription to a patient. It would also allow lens providers to fill a prescription if the doctor does not call back within eight hours to verify it.

The bill passed the House 406-12. A pending Senate spending bill for fiscal 2004 contains language guaranteeing that contact lens wearers have access to prescriptions, but House supporters said they hope the Senate will vote on their bill separately.

Supporters of the bill said it would benefit the 36 million Americans who wear contact lenses.

They said consumers spend an estimated \$3.5 billion annually to replace contact lenses, and that they could save an average 20 percent by buying from alternative sellers.

The House on Wednesday also approved legislation requiring the Food and Drug Administration to regulate noncorrective contact lens as medical devices. The bill is in response to eye injuries to people, including children, who wear colored lens for fashion or cosmetic reasons.

Rep. John Boozman, R-Ark., an optometrist, said decorative lenses now classified the same as cosmetics and available anywhere from video stores to gas stations can pose health hazards ranging from eye infections to blindness.