our medical students walked the halls of California’s state Capitol this past May, desperately seeking state Sen. Joe Simitian (D-Palo Alto). They were there for a Senate Health Committee hearing on a bill they had set in motion last year. And one of them, Josemaria Paterno, was set to testify.

“It was like your worst nightmare,” said second-year medical student Emiley Chang. “It turned out we had gotten the wrong room number. We did find the Senator eventually.”

With Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger’s signing of the bill on Sept. 30, the nightmare is all but forgotten.

The new law lets pharmacies dispense previously sold, unexpired and unopened prescription medications to patients, especially those with low incomes or severe disabilities.

The law got its start when second-year medical student Paterno proposed the project to the others in the five-member group in the Practice of Medicine course last year. Nine other states have enacted similar laws since 2001, and the students thought California should join them.

Every year California health facilities such as nursing homes dispose of as much as $100 million in medications that were prescribed to someone but never used, either because that person no longer needed or wanted the drug or because he or she passed away.

The students developed a proposal and submitted it in Simitian’s “There Oughta Be a Law” contest. The annual competition invites Californians to propose ideas for new legislation. The students’ proposal was one of five winners out of 129 entries.

Simitian then submitted a bill to the state senate on behalf of the students. “Many senators had the reaction I had at first: ‘You want to do what?’” said Simitian. “Recycling drugs sounds strange, but Jose did a great job explaining the concept.”

The proposal seemed set to sail through the legislature without a hitch until August, when Simitian learned that the Department of Health Services was opposing it.

Paterno sprang into action, writing a letter to Schwarzenegger in support of the bill and emailing Stanford faculty, asking them to sign on. The goal was to show Schwarzenegger’s administration that the bill has the approval of eminent medical experts, said Paterno.

The response was spotty. “Many didn’t reply (often because they were still on summer vacation or out of the country and not checking email),” wrote Paterno in an email updating his classmates: Chang, Michael Mancuso, Joe Peraza and Sheila Ravi.

Among the responders, though, were Dean Phillip Pizzo, MD, and senior associate dean for medical education, Julie Parsonnet, MD. “They were really influential,” said Paterno. “After that I was able to recruit most of the other senior associate deans to jump on board.”

Two days after the letter arrived at Schwarzenegger’s office, the governor announced he would sign the bill.

Now that the legislation has become law, Paterno is focused on helping it succeed. “I’m really looking forward to the next step of forming a Stanford student group and collaborating with Santa Clara and San Mateo counties,” he said. “I really want to help them establish successful and sustainable redistribution programs and encourage as many nursing homes and other health facilities as possible to participate.”

“In the beginning, these programs are definitely going to need advocates.”

For Chang, the best part of the project was seeing the fruits of their work.

She explained: “When you’re doing community work, you find that you usually don’t get to see a project to completion. Or the project takes many years. I tend to wonder if anything I do makes a difference. This time we got to reach a significant milestone in just about one year.”

MC
The Sacramento Bee

December 27, 2005

Waste not, want not

Counties can soon help the poor get low-cost drugs by recycling unused prescriptions that now are dumped

By Clea Benson
THE CAPITOL BUREAU

Although many Californians find it difficult to afford prescription drugs, nursing homes and other medical facilities literally flush millions of dollars’ worth of unused medications down the toilet each year.

A new law that goes into effect Sunday aims to reduce the waste while helping the poor obtain low-cost medicines.

The law, by Sen. Joe Simitian, D-Palo Alto, authorizes counties to collect unused prescriptions from nursing homes, wholesalers and manufacturers, and redistribute them to the low-income uninsured.

So far, only a few counties are preparing to implement drug-recycling programs. But a group of Stanford University medical students who came up with the idea is hoping it will catch on.

“We're going to start a successful redistribution program here locally and show the rest of California how it can work,” said Jose Paterno, now a second-year medical student at Stanford.

Paterno and some fellow medical students came up with the idea last year when they were assigned to design a community-service project for a class. Paterno was inspired after he read a newspaper essay by a man lamenting that he had to discard his mother’s unused medications, even though they were sealed and untouched.

And Paterno knew there was a need. According to the Kaiser Family Foundation, one in four Americans has no insurance coverage for prescriptions. Among the uninsured, about two in five don’t fill prescriptions when they need them because of the cost.

Low-income Californians can often get free or discounted medicines through their county health departments, but the aid is limited by the ability of cash-strapped local governments to pay for it.

As he researched further, Paterno found out that 25 other states had implemented drug-recycling programs — in part because there was so much waste. According to one estimate by the Journal of Family Medicine, about $1 billion of unused prescriptions are thrown away nationwide each year when patients die or their prescriptions change.

First, the students had to find a local California lawmaker who would help enact the necessary legal changes to authorize counties to recycle drugs.

Though federal regulations and state law generally prohibit the reuse of medicines once they have been dispensed, the federal Food and Drug Administration has said it will allow states to authorize recycling programs for drugs that are sealed and unused.

One afternoon, Paterno went to get a haircut in the same shopping mall where Simitian has a district office. In the window, Paterno saw a sign advertising the senator’s annual “There Oughta Be a Law” contest, a competition in which average citizens propose legislation. Simitian introduces the winners’ bills.

The students entered.

At first, Simitian, who personally reviews all of the entries in his contest, was doubtful.

“My initial reaction was unfavorable,” he said. “I thought, ‘You want to do what?’ ”

But after he studied it further, Simitian became convinced it was a good idea, especially because the proposal would reduce government spending on medicine for the indigent and prevent water pollution caused by discarded drugs that are often flushed down toilets.

“We can reduce the waste of taxpayer dollars, help people of limited means, and improve water quality,” Simitian said. “It’s a winner all around.”

In February, Simitian introduced the proposal as Senate Bill 798. Environmental groups and anti-poverty organizations signed on in support. Paterno and his colleagues traveled to Sacramento to lobby.

Both the Assembly and Senate approved it by overwhelming margins, and Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger signed it into law in September.

The law requires counties to pass local ordinances if they want to have a prescription recycling program. It also establishes safeguards. The confidentiality of the patients originally prescribed the medicines must be maintained. Only unexpired, unopened drugs in tamper-proof packaging will be accepted.

So far, only Santa Cruz, San Mateo and Santa Clara counties have started looking into establishing their own programs.

Santa Clara County has already signed up 37 nursing homes from which it will collect drug donations and is planning to have its recycling program running by the middle of next year. County-run pharmacies will use the drugs to fill prescriptions for the indigent.

Meanwhile, Paterno and his fellow medical students are forming a student organization to assist in the county effort by transporting the drug donations from local nursing homes.

Santa Clara pharmacy director Narinder Singh estimated that about $10 million in drugs is thrown away in the county each year. He expects the program will save Santa Clara about $100,000 in its first year alone. The county is especially hoping the program will reduce its need to purchase expensive brand-name medications for its poor, uninsured residents.

"From a patient's perspective, nothing changes," Singh said. "As a county, it saves us a ton of money."
February 24, 2012

Simitian’s bill to expand discarded drug program

By Bill Silverfarb
DAILY JOURNAL STAFF

With more Californians living without health insurance and needed prescription medications, state Sen. Joe Simitian, D-Palo Alto, will introduce legislation today that will expand a statewide discarded drug program first approved in 2005.

Every year, an estimated $9 billion in unused medicine and medical supplies are wasted in the United States, according to Simitian’s office, and about a third of the uninsured in California do not fill their prescriptions due to cost.

Senate Bill 798, the Recovery & Reuse of Unused Prescription Medicines bill passed in 2005, allows counties to recover unused prescription medications from skilled nursing facilities, pharmaceutical manufacturers and wholesalers and distribute them without charge to people of modest means who need the medications.

Simitian will introduce legislation today at Stanford University that will expand the numbers of who can supply and receive the surplus drugs, make it easier for counties to opt into the program and allow county pharmacies to transfer discarded drugs between themselves.

Simitian has partnered with a nonprofit group out of Stanford called Supporting Initiatives to Redistribute Unused Medicine, or SIRUM, that has redistributed more than 250,000 pills to the uninsured through SB 798 since its passage.

Simitian said SIRUM’s work shows that the program has proven itself successful and that it is time to divert more wasted drugs to those who cannot afford it.

“It is time to take the bill to new levels,” Simitian told the Daily Journal yesterday.

Clinics that serve the uninsured have high medicine acquisition costs, said Kiah Williams, co-founder and director of SIRUM.

“We see a lot of opportunity to expand the program. There are lots of uninsured in California who need access to drugs,” she said.

SIRUM provides technological and logistics help in moving the medications from one patient to another, she said.

SIRUM’s redistribution effort has already saved the state nearly $600,000.

If one nonprofit can save the state this much, Simitian said, then expanding the program should save the state even more while providing more people with needed medicine.

SB 798 ensures that all medications are collected by and maintained under the authority of a licensed pharmacist and are received and maintained in their unopened, tamper-evident packaging.

Simitian and others will hold a press conference 4:30 p.m., today, Hass Center for Public Service, 562 Salvatierra Walk, Stanford University.

Continued from page 1
Simitian plan empowers drug redistribution

BY GEORGE WANG
For The Daily News

It’s a scene that happens too many times. Staff members at a skilled nursing facility huddle over a bucket, popping pills after pill from protective bubble packs. The pills, which are perfectly good but no longer needed by the patient they were intended for, are going to be destroyed.

It is estimated that the United States generates 250 million pounds of pharmaceutical waste annually. Medications worth billions of dollars are incinerated or dumped down the drain because there are no established drug redistribution programs.

At the same time, one-third of California’s uninsured patients go without prescription drugs because they can’t afford the average retail price of $71 per prescription.

But in two California counties, Santa Clara and San Mateo, the waste has been reduced and the uninsured have been helped because of a policy authored by State Sen. Joe Simitian, D-Palo Alto. Under its provisions, a nonprofit organization called SIRUM (Supporting Initiatives to Redistribute Unused Medicine) has coordinated the donation of more than $600,000, wholesale, of medicine. Having proved their value, such programs should be expanded, which is the aim of new legislation, Senate Bill 1329, just introduced by Simitian.

SIRUM was created by Stanford University students to redirect unused, non-expired drugs to free and low-cost medical clinics. A group of Stanford Medical School students proposed the idea in 2006 in Simitian’s annual “There Oughta Be a Law” contest. The legislation was passed and signed into law that same year.

The original legislation permits counties to collect medications that otherwise would be discarded — a source of water pollution if they are dumped down the drain — and then to dispense them to those most in need. We at SIRUM have created what you might call a Match.com for medicine — an online community of medicine donors and medical clinics that depend on donations. Donors post what they have and clinics post what they need.

Since 2009, SIRUM has helped Santa Clara and San Mateo counties establish and coordinate the only two drug redistribution programs in the state. Seventy donors have joined our network. Sonoma and Riverside counties are actively developing drug redistributions with SIRUM. Other counties also have expressed interest in pursuing similar programs.

SIRUM is now poised and ready to take the next step forward. To do so, Sen. Simitian is once again working with us on new legislation that will help us reach even more indigent and low-income Californians by expanding the kinds of facilities that can donate drugs and the number of those who can be recipients.

Under SB 1329, the list of eligible donor groups would grow from the current requirement that donors be a wholesaler, drug manufacturer or skilled nursing facility to include facilities such as residential care facilities and mental health rehabilitation centers. Pills that treat mental illness, particularly anti-psychotics and antidepressants, are among the most prevalent — and expensive — medicines that go to waste.

The list of potential recipients would expand as well, to permit nonprofit community clinics, as well as county-run facilities, to acquire and dispense redirected medications.

Over the past three years, some 200,000 pills have been redirected through SIRUM without incident. By expanding on this proven concept, we can assure that throughout California medicine works its intended purpose — curing the sick instead of ending up in the trash.

Less waste, more people helped and lower costs for taxpayers. It’s a winner all around. The Legislature should pass, and the governor should sign, SB 1329.

George Wang is director of operations for Stanford-based Supporting Initiatives to Redistribute Unused Medicine (SIRUM).