



Vancouver Sun Op Ed – December 2008

Re: Don't pull the plug on the Therapeutics Initiative, November 28

Once again the defenders of the Therapeutics Initiative have embarked on a PR campaign to try and save the positions of a small, insulated group of academics receiving millions of dollars from the BC government. What we have heard over the past week from these TI defenders would not surprise anyone following the Pharmaceutical Task Force ("PTF") process because we have been hearing the same rhetoric from the same ideologically blinkered perspective throughout the past 12 months.

Fortunately, the rest of us have moved on. What has passed the TI defenders by is that stakeholders and the Government have progressed from positions of self-interest and simply identifying problems to multi-lateral consultations focusing on evidence-based solutions and recommendations.

This has been an emboldening experience for the 2 million patients represented by the Better Pharmacare Coalition in BC. We no longer feel our position on the frontlines is being ignored. The PTF has listened carefully to patients who have told them what it's like to deal with the frustration involved in gaining access to life-saving or life-improving medications in BC. For many individuals living with chronic disease and their families, the PTF process has been the first time in their lifetimes that a BC Government has tried not just to understand the emotionally and physically painful daily experience coping with chronic, life-threatening disease, but also to find constructive ways to fix a costly and ineffective provincial drug review system.

Just how did BC end up with one of the poorest performing pharmacare programs in Canada?

The Pharmaceutical Task Force discovered that the TI's involvement in the review process creates a major bottleneck (review times for evaluating new medicines in BC are taking two to three years to complete, while reviews in other provinces take about six months).

The Task Force also found that the TI lacked any accountability to government or to British Columbians, lacked individuals with the skills in the formal assessment of cost-effectiveness and had limited or no input from those most skilled in assessing a medication for a specific condition: specialist doctors.

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The Task Force learned that the TI performs a job function already fulfilled by two other highly respected federal and federal/provincial/territorial regulatory bodies - Health Canada and the Common Drug Review. Let's be clear: when the Therapeutics Initiative makes a recommendation that the BC Government not list a medication on the provincial medication formulary (or when review times stretch for literally years), the only people affected are those who depend on the public drug plan. People with enough money, or extended health benefits, can access these medications. People who depend on BC PharmaCare are left out in the cold. We wonder how many of the TI defenders actually depend on the provincial public drug plan for their own medications?

But the PTF recommendations represented only the halfway point towards reforming BC Pharmacare. After seven months of multi-lateral stakeholder meetings across BC, we now arrive at the implementation phase. For TI defenders who are claiming that "now is the time to speak," we wonder where you have been since the PTF recommendations were released in April 2008 and regret you did not find your way to contribute meaningfully to this once-in-a-lifetime chance to reform BC Pharmacare.

In case the TI defenders were wondering, here's what you have missed:

The BPC has consulted closely with the Pharmaceutical Services Division ("PSD") to replace the TI with a Drug Review Resource Committee and improve dialogue with outside stakeholders through meaningful representation in BC PharmaCare decision-making processes.

The Task Force recommendations envision a drug submission review process that provides an opportunity for informed consumer/patient involvement in all aspects of the process. Specifically, the BPC is working with the PSD to implement Task Force recommendations that call for the participation of knowledgeable patients living with disease to sit on decision-making committees and drug reviews to provide their vitally important perspective to ensure fulsome discussion and deliberation on the "real world" therapeutic and economic value of a particular drug. This full and meaningful participation of patient committee members in the drug review process ensures that the BC Government's PharmaCare program is operating in the most transparent manner possible.

The BPC has also been consulting with Government on how to best implement the Task Force recommendations to add "front line" clinical researchers and specialist physicians into the drug review process – a key component that is lacking in the current process.

Important proposed improvements include:

- The ability of experts who actually prescribe drugs and manage the health of British Columbians to look at and comment on the evidence gained from randomized controlled trials.
- The participation of appropriate disease specialists (professionals and patients), to assist in determining best-practice guidelines for the listing of safe and effective medications, devices and supplies in BC.
- The input and participation by epidemiologic and clinical experts as well as the addition of economic analysis support, to examine the full economic impact across the whole health system as well as those areas of government significantly impacted by indirect health care costs (e.g. Ministries of Housing and Social Development and Small business and Revenue).
- Ultimately, the replacement of the TI with a new responsive, accountable and transparent drug review process will allow people who depend on the government-funded provincial formulary to have the same opportunity as other Canadians for timely access to reimbursement coverage for new medicines through the BC PharmaCare program.

We encourage the TI defenders to join a majority of health stakeholders in BC, including patient groups, and work together with us to improve the transparency, expertise, and relevance of all bodies involved in BC's drug review process.

Signed,

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