

Recent BC Ministry of Health Decisions are Steps Toward Improving Patient Access to Medications

A few steps forward, but the journey is long.

Friday, February 16, 2018 (Vancouver):

Elimination of deductibles for low-income families (as of January 2019)¹ as well as the addition of five new medications to the BC PharmaCare formulary² are positive first steps from the BC Ministry of Health and leadership at BC PharmaCare toward addressing access to medications issues faced by patients. It is worth noting, however, that much work remains to be done to chip away at the barriers still present for some patients seeking treatment for their chronic diseases in BC.

This is due, in part, to BC falling behind other provinces in its funding of prescription medications over the last ten years. Although health care spending budgets for areas like physicians and hospitals have increased by 93% over the same period of time, BC's expenditure on prescription medications is the lowest in Canada on a per capita basis, 34% below the national average.³ This translates to approximately 40 drugs not being listed for coverage on the BC public drug formulary that are covered in at least one other Canadian province.⁴ It is no surprise then that in a recent study published in *CMAJ Open* highlighting the almost 1 million patients across Canada sacrificing basic needs such as food and heat to afford their medications, BC had the highest rate of individuals unable to fill their prescriptions due to cost.⁵

New hope for some patients

For British Columbians living with multiple sclerosis, idiopathic pulmonary fibrosis, hepatic encephalopathy, and hereditary angioedema medications added to the public drug formulary last week provide treatment options for patients, in some cases after years of waiting for coverage.

Members of the Better Pharmacare Coalition advocating on behalf of patients suffering from chronic diseases highlighted the need for patient access to four of the newly listed medications in Victoria this past November. We are grateful and applaud BC PharmaCare for making this long overdue decision to add drugs through its limited drug coverage program available to patients who meet specific pre-defined criteria. Included in this list are alemtuzumab (Lemtrada™), nintedanib (Ofev®), pirfenidone (Esbriet®), and rifaximin (Zaxine).

Others must continue to wait

Sadly, this only makes a small dent in the list of 40 medications missing from the public formulary with those suffering from many other chronic diseases such as schizophrenia, Parkinson's, osteoporosis, and uterine fibroids still waiting for coverage of effective treatments.

With the tabling of the budget in BC next week, health advocates will be eagerly waiting to see what other steps this government is taking in the underfunded health care arena. We have offered to continue to work with government to forge solutions for the challenges faced by patients in BC as they live with and seek treatment for debilitating disease.

Ultimately, we must ensure that all patients in BC, along with the rest of Canada, receive fair and timely access to the medications they need, without having to worry about whether they can afford their next meal.

References

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- (2) Shaw, R. (2018, February 15). B.C. health minister approves coverage for new round of rare drugs. *The Vancouver Sun*. Retrieved from vancouversun.com
- (3) CIHI National Health Expenditure Trends, 1975-2016
- (4) BC PharmaCare Coverage 2017, <https://advocacybootcamp.org/>
- (5) Law, MR, *et al.* *CMAJO*, February 13, 2018(6)1:E63-E70