**Yussuff:**

**A national pharmacare program will cure what ails us**

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**Failure to take medication as prescribed can greatly reduce health outcomes and put lives at risk, writes Hassan Yussuff.**

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**By Hassan Yussuff**

Patricia is a 61-year-old woman who takes medication for some fairly common health issues, including arthritis, high cholesterol, a thyroid condition and chronic pain management.

She retired three years ago after a 35-year career in a unionized job with prescription drug coverage.

In retirement, Patricia’s drug coverage has a cap of $2,000 per year, so her coverage maxes out just before Thanksgiving. Since she is not yet a senior, she isn’t eligible for government assistance. Patricia spends the remainder of each year juggling prescriptions and deciding which ailment to treat and which to endure.

Rod pays more than $100 out of pocket every month for his asthma inhalers and has done so for his entire adult life. If Rod can’t afford to use his inhalers as prescribed, he could wind up in hospital, at far greater expense to our health-care system.

I’ve heard hundreds of stories like Patricia and Rod’s. They are among the millions of people in Canada who are falling through the cracks of the current patchwork system of private prescription coverage with only limited public support.

The lack of universal pharmacare in Canada can impact anyone and it’s most likely to affect us in our most desperate time of need.

Here in Alberta, individuals under 65 and their dependents are covered by the province’s Non-group Coverage Benefit. Beneficiaries still pay a monthly deductible of $63.50 for individuals and $118 for families, in addition to a 30 per cent co-payment, up to a maximum of $25 per prescription.

Studies have shown that even slight costs will deter many people from taking their medication as prescribed.

Earlier this year, people from every corner of Canada showed up at town hall meetings on pharmacare hosted by the Canadian Labour Congress, to share personal struggles about paying for medication. They were angry and discouraged. Their stories often left us in tears.

Why should you or someone you love be forced to skip doses, go into debt, or jeopardize their health because their prescriptions are too costly?

Failure to take medication as prescribed can greatly reduce health outcomes and put lives at risk. It also adds strain and cost to a health-care system that is already overburdened.

Canada is the only developed country in the world with a universal health-care program that doesn’t include universal drug coverage. It just doesn’t make sense.

Imagine how much more efficient health care could be if people had coverage for the medications they need. Common conditions such as asthma could be better controlled, and people with chronic and complicated conditions wouldn’t be financially burdened.

They would have fewer visits to emergency rooms and doctors’ offices, and they would never have to choose between taking medication and buying groceries. Quality of life would increase significantly.

Earlier this year, the federal government took an important step forward with the creation of the Advisory Council on the Implementation of National Pharmacare. Shortly after, the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Health recommended a single-payer, universal prescription drug program for Canada.

In response, the pharmaceutical and insurance companies — which together make billions from our inefficient system — began aggressively campaigning against a universal pharmacare plan that allows the government to drive down costs through bulk buying.

They want the government to simply “fill in the gaps” for people without coverage. But this will ignore all those who are being charged co-payments and deductibles, and those whose plan restrictions and limitations are failing them. Most of all, this approach ignores the incredibly inflated prices we all pay for prescription medication.

This is our moment. Universal pharmacare would mean that everyone with a health card in Canada would have coverage for the prescriptions they need and a single-payer system would deliver big savings.

It is up to each of us to let our provincial and federal political representatives know that Band-Aid solutions won’t work on a broken system.

***Hassan Yussuff is president of the Canadian Labour Congress.***