**National Pharmacare Program**

At the conclusion of the ACER-CART Annual General Meeting in Ottawa on June 2-3, 2017 President Brian Kenny proposed four priorities for the organization in 2017 – 2018. One of the priorities was “to develop strategies and produce resources for retired teachers and seniors supporting a one Canadian purchaser national pharmaceutical formulary”.

**Background**

Canada is the only developed country in the world with a universal health care program that doesn’t include a universal prescription drug plan. We have the second highest prescription drug costs in the world next to the United States. Canada has widely varying prescription drug coverage and uneven access to prescription drugs, and often Canadians pay different rates for the same medication, depending on where they live. The idea of a nationally funded prescription drug program was recommended as the second half of a universal health care program in the Royal Commission on Healthcare report in 1964.

Canada is not benefiting from the current system, but pharmaceutical and private insurance companies are. Pharmaceutical companies can charge higher prices for commonly used drugs because they are selling to so many buyers. Private insurance companies benefit by charging employers, unions and employees to administer private drug insurance plans.

In a study entitled Pharmacare 2020: The Future of Drug Coverage In Canada it was revealed that New Zealand’s national drug program allows it to bring prices down by bargaining with drug companies for the entire country. An example of cost savings is the brand name anti-cholesterol drug Lipitor. For a year’s supply in New Zealand the cost would be $15 versus a minimum $811 in Canada. A year’s supply of the generic version of Lipitor would cost $140 in Canada, more than nine times greater than the New Zealand price tag.

The only place where prescriptions are covered for all Canadians is in a hospital. Every provincial and territorial government provides different coverage for its citizens. Most subsidize the cost of medications for vulnerable Canadians, such as those over 65 years old and recipients of social assistance and disability benefits. Many also provide catastrophic coverage, but only for those facing the most astronomical prescription costs.

We need a national pharmacare program that covers all Canadians! One in five Canadians pay out of pocket for their medications, either because they don’t have a prescription drug plan or because they have a plan that doesn’t cover the full cost of medications they need. It is estimated that one in ten Canadians do not fill prescriptions because they can’t afford them.

Canada needs to combine the purchasing power of all governments (federal, provincial, territorial) under one Canadian purchaser in support of a national pharmaceutical formulary. The Pharmacare 2020 study indicated that the combined purchasing power of a national pharmacare program would save from $4 billion to $11 billion a year in prescriptions. Further by using evidence and information systems to guide drug coverage and prescribing there would be a savings of $5 billion a year by reducing the problems of drug overuse, underuse and misuse.

**The Next Step**

In 2015 Angus Reid polled Canadians on this issue and an overwhelming majority of 91 percent said they believe our public health care system should include a universal prescription drug plan. Several national health care commissions have recommended the same, along with the Canadian Medical Association, Canadian Federation of Nurses Union, Canadian Doctors for Medicare, Federation of Canadian Municipalities, Canadian Health Coalition, Council of Canadians and the Canadian Labour Congress.

What is now necessary is the political will of all governments to provide a one Canadian purchaser national pharmaceutical formulary. At the Council of Federation meetings over the past three years all provincial and territorial governments have stated categorically that they are in favour of a national pharmacare program. At the present time the federal government covers the costs of prescription drugs for members of the Armed Forces, the RCMP, Veterans and Indigenous peoples – approximately fifty percent of the total costs of prescription drugs in Canada. Why is the federal government resisting the implementation of a national pharmacare program?

It is now our responsibility to lobby Members of Parliament and inform them of the tremendous cost savings of such a plan and complete the unfinished business of our national medicare system. We need the Trudeau government to commit to the implementation of a national publicly administered universal prescription drug plan for every Canadian in every province and territory.

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