

Prescription for Pharmacare Must Be Filled



by Michael Butler

The idea of universal public pharmacare in Canada has been around since the beginning of Canadian medicare, but the script remains unfilled.

Prescription drug coverage was recommended as a “next step” by the 1964 Royal Commission on Health Services. That call was echoed by the 2002 Commission on the Future of Health Care (the Romanow Commission) and a Senate report. Evidence-based studies continue to support the call for this needed program. Canadians have now been waiting over 50 years for pharmacare, and despite the continued recommendations, Canadians remain stuck with an inefficient, unethical and fragmented group of drug plans.

The World Health Organization has declared that all nations are obligated to ensure equitable access to necessary medicines through pharmaceutical policies. Consequently, every developed country that has a universal health insurance system provides universal coverage of prescription drugs – except for Canada. Of the 33 countries in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), Canada provides the smallest percentage of its

citizens with a public drug plan other than the United States. Two-thirds of the countries in the OECD provide 100 per cent drug coverage.

The result of our fragmented and patchwork system is that many Canadians have no drug coverage at all. One in ten Canadians are not able to afford their prescriptions. This does not include people who ration or skip taking their medication due to costs. A new research study has estimated the number of people who ration or skip medication could actually be as high as 1 in 5.

Medications are needed to keep people healthy and to save lives, yet every year more than 3 million Canadians don't get these necessary medications, which include everything from asthma inhalers to insulin, because they cannot afford them. Not only is this unsafe; it is fundamentally unethical that Canadians are covered for their prescription drugs based on their socio-economic status, their age, where they live, or work, rather than on their medical needs.

Drug prices in Canada are also among the highest in the world due to our

poorly structured system. Studies have shown that a universal pharmacare program could save between \$4 billion and \$11 billion a year depending on how the program is organized.

During the Council of the Federation meeting held in St. John's, Newfoundland and Labrador, in July, the Council of Canadians signed a document with national labour leaders and four provincial premiers, calling on the federal government to establish a national drug plan. At the same time, a Canada-wide poll was released that found that more than 90 per cent of Canadians want pharmacare.

It is clear there is a growing call for our politicians to show leadership and implement a long overdue universal pharmacare plan that is public, affordable and safe. But this means real action at both provincial and federal levels of government. It is time for a universal, comprehensive pharmacare program that will meaningfully improve the health of all Canadians.

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