

Parliamentary Committee Provides New Hope for Universal Pharmacare



The House of Commons Standing Committee on Health has breathed new hope into the long-term quest for universal pharmacare.

When the Committee released the report in April, the *Canadian Press* reported, “A parliamentary committee is recommending that prescription medications be publicly funded across Canada under a universal pharmacare program. The report includes 18 recommendations that it describes as a blueprint for establishing a single-payer, publicly funded prescription drug coverage program for all Canadians.”

The *CBC* added, “The all-party committee ... looked at two possible options for pharmacare. The first was a universal single-payer public prescription drug plan — which it settled on as its recommendation. The second option was to look at reforming the system to plug the gaps between public and private plans to ensure wider coverage.”

The Council of Canadians has long advocated for a universal pharmacare program.

Just after Justin Trudeau was elected in October 2015, Maude Barlow, Honorary Chairperson of the Council of Canadians, signed an open letter imploring him to take action on this issue.

That letter stated, “Pharmaceuticals are so essential to health and well-being that the World Health Organization has declared that all nations should ensure universal access to necessary medicines. Consistent with that recommendation, every developed country with a universal health care system provides universal coverage of medically necessary prescriptions — except Canada. Unlike any comparable country, Canada’s universal public health care system effectively ends as soon as a patient is handed a prescription to fill.”

Council of Canadians chapters across the country have visited their MPs, asking that the Trudeau government implement a national pharmacare program that would provide universal access to prescription drugs for everyone in this country.

Council of Canadians North Shore chapter activist Berta Gaulke delivered Council of Canadians pharmacare campaign materials to the office of Bill Casey. Casey is the Liberal MP who chairs the House of Commons Standing Committee on Health that has now recommended a single-payer universal public prescription drug plan. Campaign materials were also delivered to Liberal MP Doug Eyolfson and NDP MP Don Davies who are also key members of the House of Commons standing committee.

The Canadian Health Coalition welcomed the House of Commons report noting, “The committee also proposes serious improvements to the protection of Canadians from the self-interest of pharmaceutical companies. New drugs would be evaluated by an independent government agency free of influence by pharmaceutical companies.”

Now, to make the report recommendations happen!

In late February, the federal government appointed Dr. Eric Hoskins to chair an advisory council with the goal recommending options on how to “ensure every Canadian has access to the medicine they need.” That council is to report to the government in spring 2019, which may indicate the Trudeau government won’t take action on the House of Commons standing committee report until spring 2019.

The Council of Canadians continues to call on the government to take immediate action on pharmacare and not wait until next year and the lead-up to the October 2019 federal election. It’s estimated that one in ten Canadians are not able to access the medications they need due to costs.

Global News reported, “A new report by the Canadian Federation of Nurses Unions estimates that hundreds of Canadians die every year because they are unable to afford their prescription medication. The report estimates that a lack of prescription drug coverage contributes annually to 370-640 premature deaths due to ischemic heart disease, 270-420 premature deaths of working-age Canadians with diabetes, and 550-670 premature deaths from all causes among working-age Canadians.”

At the same time, the Trudeau government is supporting free trade agreements that increase the cost of pharmaceutical drugs.

In April, *iPolitics* reported, “Extended patent protections under Canada’s free trade deal with the European Union could cost the federal government some \$270 million a year, according to a new report by the Parliamentary Budget Officer. ...The two year extension certificates would delay introduction of cheaper generic drugs, granting longer market exclusivity and keeping drug costs higher. ...The report said the estimates are likely understated because of the rapidly changing nature of the pharmaceutical landscape in Canada.”

To take action and learn more, visit our website at canadians.org/pharmacare, or call us toll-free at 1-800-387-7177.