

The Journal-Pioneer

The Journal-Pioneer (Summerside)
Editorial, Wednesday, December 1, 2004, p. 4

Opinion

Putting patients first

Williams, Russell

It was with interest and genuine concern I read your editorial, Drug costs hard pill to swallow (Nov. 17).

In highlighting the illness of provincial NDP Leader Gary Robichaud and the medical treatment he is to undertake, it is my fervent hope he and others battling cancer will be successful in defeating this most dreaded disease.

The battle to find cures and improved treatments for the over 100 types of cancer continues unabated.

Along the way, we are often disappointed, heart-broken and even impatient with the results to put an end to cancer. There have been successes in treating and, yes, even curing a number of these cancers.

There will be more successes.

With the medical research and development (R&D) into cancer by the pharmaceutical community, even more cancers will one day be either cured or relegated to the chronic disease category.

Already, we have seen breakthrough medicines that have made a difference in people's lives: Gleevec for the treatment of cancer (chronic myeloid leukemia), Zofran, which helps prevent nausea associated with chemotherapy and radiation treatments, Xigris the first and only therapy approved in Canada for the treatment of severe sepsis (acute organ dysfunction), Spiriva a significant improvement in the treatment of chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, and 3TC for the treatment of HIV/AIDS, just to name a few.

Contrary to what was expressed in your editorial, patients come first when it comes to the research and development conducted day in and day out by our medical researchers and those in our universities, hospitals and laboratories.

It is true new innovative medicines are expensive. These prices, however, are regulated in Canada by the Patented Medicine Prices Review Board to ensure they are not "excessive".

When examining the cost of patented medicines in relation to health-care expenditures, only 6.5 cents of every health-care dollar from public and private sources goes directly toward patented prescription medicines.

The importance of access for patients to the most effective therapies to treat illness and disease cannot be over emphasized. The time it takes to have new medicines listed on provincial formularies varies from one province to another.

In P.E.I. for example, during the period August 2002-September 2004, it took an average time of two and a half years to list a new medicine on the provincial formulary.

All citizens of Atlantic Canada should have the same access to innovative medicines as other Canadians.

This past summer, we began consultations with Prince Edward Island and other provincial governments on a pan-Canadian pharmaceutical strategy that will be a win-win for patients and Canadians, as a whole. This strategy is based on the following principles: patient access to new innovative medicines; physician choice in prescribing appropriate medicines; the optimal use of medicines; and an improved national environment to attract and retain new research jobs and investments in **pharmaceutical research** and development.

At present, the provincial governments are promoting a national Pharmacare strategy. While the specifics of such a program are being debated and deliberated upon, this strategy is also important for what it should not include. The strategy should not be used as a method to simply reduce the specific costs of drugs but should be a program designed to improve patient outcomes and help the long-term sustainability of our health-care system.

Any short-term cost-cutting could reduce access to innovative medicines. Furthermore, increased access to certain innovative medicines would save in other more costly areas such as surgery, hospitalization and waiting lists.

Patients, their health and quality of life, must remain the cornerstone of our health-care strategy. An effective pan-Canadian pharmaceutical strategy, which clearly defines federal and provincial roles and ensures the most effective access to innovative medicines is crucial to future sustainability of our system.

A study by the analysis group shows the strong correlation between pharmaceutical spending, longer life expectancy and lower infant mortality.

Restrictive policies based on limiting patient access and choice to new discoveries will have a negative impact on Canada's ability to generate more investment in R&D and contribute to global searches for cures.

New medicines play a role in Canadians having more productive lives and a quality of life generations before them did not have. Today, seniors are living in their own homes or elsewhere in their communities due, in part, to the availability of medicines.

A Columbia University study has found that each dollar invested in new medicines relieves our health-care system from expenses seven times greater in other health-care areas.

Canada is blessed with world-class research facilities and researchers in industry, universities, and hospitals. As a key partner in the delivery of health care, the research-based pharmaceutical community is committed to operating in an open environment. We are committed to working with all levels of government and health-care stakeholders to ensure Canada has an affordable, equitable and sustainable publicly-funded health-care system.

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Category: Editorial and Opinions

Uniform subject(s): Health and social services

Length: Medium, 655 words

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Doc. : news:20041201·JP·0020