
ONTARIANS FACE TWO-TIER HEALTHCARE BASED ON DISEASE: INFLAMMATORY ARTHRITIS PATIENTS BEING DENIED LIFE-SAVING TREATMENTS

TORONTO, May 29, 2008 (Canada NewsWire via COMTEX) -- Arthritis Consumer Experts (ACE) and Canadian Arthritis Patients Alliance (CAPA) today called on the Ontario government to put an end to discrimination against arthritis patients by listing medically necessary treatments on the provincial medication reimbursement plan.

"It is high time that those living with inflammatory arthritis in Ontario receive the same treatment by the public health care system as those with other severe and life threatening diseases," said Cheryl Koehn, President of ACE. "While the government sits on listing decisions for years at a time, people are dying."

The lack of coverage for medically necessary treatments, already approved by Health Canada and the Common Drug Review is seen by many as a potential violation of the Ontario Human Rights Code.

"Discrimination based on a disability is a violation of the human rights code," said Toronto lawyer Hugh O'Reilly. "The reason for denial or delayed decisions appears to be cost, which is not a valid reason under the code."

Koehn explained that as no patient can be treated with more than one biologic treatment at a time, increasing the number of treatments listed on the provincial formulary would not lead to skyrocketing costs. Instead, it would ensure that physicians and patients had access to the proper armament of treatments when making important, life-saving decisions.

"These treatments are scientific breakthroughs and have been recommended for listing by the Common Drug Review, a process that the Ontario government funds and says it supports," said Koehn. "It is important that government take into account the ramifications of not treating inflammatory arthritis. Without the right treatment for individual patients, joint deformity and disability are guaranteed. I refuse to believe that if the Ontario government really understood the complexity and severity of inflammatory arthritis, these delays would continue."

Koehn described most patients with inflammatory arthritis as in the prime of their working lives. For these people, the right biologic response modifier at the right time can mean the difference between productivity and disability, an issue that has various and wide-ranging economic impacts on the province.

Dr. Heather McDonald-Blumer, Program Director for the Division of Rheumatology at the University of Toronto, noted that restricting a physician's ability to use their training and expertise to provide optimal treatment for an individual patient has negative consequences for the individual patient, and beyond.

"Effectively, the province is telling rheumatologists who have been trained to specialize in diagnosing and treating inflammatory arthritis that some of our patients will not be able to access critical, joint saving therapies, dooming those patients to progressive joint damage, disability and subsequent dependence," said Dr. McDonald-Blumer. "It is frustrating to know there is good evidence to support the use of a variety of biological therapies in inflammatory arthritic conditions and not be able to choose the most effective of these for our individual patients, especially knowing that these medications are approved by Health Canada and are available to patients residing in other Canadian provinces."

Specifically in Ontario, ACE and CAPA are calling on the following treatments to be listed on the provincial formulary:

- Abatacept (Orencia(R)) for rheumatoid arthritis
- Adalimumab (Humira(R)) for ankylosing spondylitis
- Infliximab (Remicade(R)) for psoriatic arthritis
- Rituximab (Rituxan(R)) for rheumatoid arthritis in accordance with Common Drug Review guidelines

"These treatments have been under review for anywhere from ten months to close to two years, despite being supported by Health Canada and Common Drug Review approvals," said Koehn. "This is unacceptable for those with inflammatory arthritis in Ontario. We cannot afford to wait any longer."

About ACE

Arthritis Consumer Experts (ACE) is a national organization that provides research-based information and education to Canadians with arthritis. The organization helps to empower people living with all forms of arthritis to take control of their disease and to take action in health care and research decision making. ACE is led by people with arthritis and its activities are guided by a strict set of guiding principles, and by an advisory board comprised of leading scientists, medical professionals and informed arthritis activists.

About CAPA

The Canadian Arthritis Patient Alliance (CAPA) is a national independent grassroots organization of members united in their desire to improve the quality of life of Canadians with arthritis. CAPA provides a strong voice to promote the social, economic and physical well-being of Canadians living with arthritis

SOURCE: Arthritis Consumer Experts

Quincey Kirschner, (778) 847-9793, kirschner@arthritisconsumerexperts.org