

Group upset over decision not to cover arthritis drugs

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[CBC News](#)

An advocacy group is slamming the Saskatchewan Health Department for deciding not to cover three expensive drugs for treating a debilitating form of arthritis.

According to Arthritis Consumer Experts, one in 200 Canadians suffers from ankylosing spondylitis, which affects the spine.

People with the condition lose mobility and their ability to breathe is diminished.

The group had hoped that a provincial committee that recommends which drugs will be covered by medicare would say yes to Enbrel, Remicade and Humira — three so-called "biologic drugs" that are already used to treat other forms of arthritis.

However, the Saskatchewan Formulary Committee decided against it.

"These drugs were not recommended for listing for ankylosing spondylitis because the Saskatchewan review committees suggest the clinical benefit does not justify the incremental cost of these drugs," the committee said in its October bulletin.

Cheryl Koehn, the president of Arthritis Consumer Experts, says the decision flies in the face of evidence that the treatments are effective.

Although the drugs are expensive, they will be cost-effective, she said.

"The leading outcome in under-treated or untreated ankylosing spondylitis is work disability," she said. "We as taxpayers are going to pay, and are paying a heck of a lot more than we would pay for a biologic."

Koehn estimates 5,000 people suffer from varying degrees of ankylosing spondylitis in Saskatchewan.

The treatments in question can cost between \$15,000 and \$20,000 a year per patient.

Reporters were quizzing the Saskatchewan Party about the group's requests on Wednesday.

The Saskatchewan Party, which won the Nov. 7 election and will be running the Health Department in a matter of days, spent some time in opposition urging the NDP government to add new drugs for coverage, including the cancer drug Avastin.

Don McMorris, who was the health critic when the Saskatchewan Party was in opposition, said he expects the NDP opposition to make the same kinds of requests.

"Yes, we pushed the government on certain drugs, absolutely, and the new opposition will be doing the same thing. And it's the decision that the government of the day will have to make."

McMorris said it's too early to say what the government will do about the latest request to expand drug coverage.

"I can't make that decision right now because I'm not privy to any of the briefing notes," he said.