

B.C. arthritis drug access rated low; Rheumatologist says drug reviews can take years before approval

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B.C. ranks toward the bottom of the heap when it comes to providing Pharmacare drug coverage to those with crippling forms of arthritis, an advocacy group for patients said Monday.

The group initially gave the province an F, but upgraded that to a D when it learned the government announced last month it would cover one of the drugs, Humira, for psoriatic arthritis.

The report by Arthritis Consumer Experts initially ranked B.C. with Nunavut, the Northwest Territories, Manitoba and Prince Edward Island. But with the upgrade, B.C. abruptly moved up to join Yukon in a still-less-than-stellar category near the bottom of all provinces. Quebec had the highest grade -- B-plus -- followed by Ontario with a B.

The grades were based on the number of modern drugs called "biologics" that each province covers through their respective drug insurance schemes for three types of arthritis: rheumatoid arthritis, ankylosing spondylitis and psoriatic arthritis.

The report also considered drugs under review or rejected for coverage. Biologics, which include drugs such as Humira, Enbrel, Remicade and Rituxan, cost between \$8,000 to \$20,000 a year per patient.

Some patients with extended-health insurance plans might get some help paying for such drugs.

There are nearly 100 different types of arthritis, including osteoarthritis, the most common, but the report looked only at three types marked by severe inflammation and which benefit from the newest drugs. In B.C., about 50,000 patients are affected by the three types. Of those, only about 5,000 would fit the criteria for trying the drugs in question.

Cheryl Koehn, the Vancouver-based president of ACE, said in an interview from Ottawa, where the report was released, that governments are discriminating against arthritis patients.

"Patients with cancer and HIV/AIDS get state-of-the-art treatment but not those with arthritis, even though these are treatments that have been approved and recommended for coverage by the Common Drug Review," she said, referring to the national agency that reviews clinical trials and cost effectiveness of drugs before recommending to provinces whether they should be covered.

Koehn, 47, diagnosed with rheumatoid arthritis nearly 20 years ago, uses one of the covered drugs

and attests to the benefits. "I am a former Olympic-calibre volleyball player who went from that to being in a wheelchair at the age of 29. Through drug treatment that was available at the time, I gradually improved to the point of being able to walk, and since I went on a biologic drug in 2003, I've improved enough to play tennis," she said.

Vancouver rheumatologist Dr. John Esdaile, head of the Canadian Arthritis Network, said in an interview it's ironic B.C. led the push to establish the Common Drug Review (CDR) "but let's be honest, it's a joke when drugs are being approved [by CDR] and they are still not included for coverage by Pharmacare."

Esdaile said B.C. has been reviewing some treatments for three years.

"It shouldn't take that long. They are not paying for these drugs because they don't want to spend the money, even though, for the most severe cases, the drugs might restore mobility, let patients get back to work and give people their lives back," he said.

"About 50 per cent of patients who try these drugs have a miraculous recovery but they are not without side-effects so we don't use them flippantly."

Sarah Plank, spokeswoman for the Ministry of Health, said Pharmacare does cover many arthritis medications and others might make it on to the formulary in the spring. She said the government announced in a bulletin last month it would cover Humira for psoriatic arthritis. But the report card information collection was done before that announcement.

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B.C. REIMBURSEMENT LISTINGS FOR DRUGS FOR ARTHRITIC CONDITIONS PROVINCE'S GRADE: D

Generic Name abatacept adalimumab anakinra etanercept infliximab rituximab

(Brand Name) (Orencia) (Humira) (Kineret) (Enbrel) (Remicade) (Rituxan)

Rheumatoid Under review Listed Declined Listed - Listed - Under review

Arthritis since Jul 2007 CBC* listing CBC* CBC* since Feb '07

Ankylosing Not Under review Not Under review
Under review N/A

Spondylitis applicable since Nov '06 applicable since
May '05 since Jul '05

Psoriatic In clinical Under review Not Listed - CBC*
Under review N/A

Arthritis trials since Jul '06 applicable Length of Feb
2007

review, 3 years

* Case by case

Source: Arthritis Consumer Experts VANCOUVER
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