

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Government Urged to Close the Gap in Cancer Care
Cancer patients plead for help

TORONTO, ON, October 17, 2005 – Ontario cancer patients delivered an impassioned plea to the Ontario government at Queen’s Park today: close the gap in care that prevents patients from receiving the intravenous chemotherapy their oncologists recommend.

At the root of the problem is an inconsistent policy at the Ministry of Health and Long-term Care that treats oral chemotherapy and intravenous chemotherapy differently. After Health Canada approves any new cancer drug, Ontario conducts a review to decide whether to pay for it here, although no one can tell how long that review will take. While the review is underway, the ministry will make exceptions to cover oral drugs, based on the opinion of the oncologist that nothing else will work. These are called Section 8 exceptions. But the ministry has rejected pleas for the same exception policy to be available for intravenous chemotherapy during the review process. Meanwhile, hospitals can only use intravenous chemotherapy on the approved list, from a specific fund created for that purpose.

It means Ontario has two classes of cancer patients and the dividing line is simply the form of the drug: oral or intravenous.

Patient Impact

Carolyn Henry, of London, ON said, “I am living with a cancer that has started to become active again and my oncologist has already told me about the chemotherapy I will need. It’s an intravenous treatment that Ontario can’t seem to make a decision about, so I will have to find approximately \$35,000 in the next few weeks, and pay thousands more to have the drug administered in a private clinic. This will put my family into financial distress.”

Suzanne Aucoin agrees that cancer patients cannot wait. “My cancer centre did not offer any of the new therapies for my colorectal cancer and I travelled to the U.S. for a second opinion. The treatment choices in the U.S. were more up-to-date and more effective, so I created a website to raise funds for the cost of my chemotherapy there. To date, the costs have amounted to \$66,000 USD and that is going to increase. Now I am at the stage where it is time to introduce a new drug to the treatment, but I do not have time to wait for Ontario to make a decision.”

“The chemotherapy divide isn’t fair or logical and it certainly isn’t good health care,” according to Colleen Savage, president and CEO, Cancer Advocacy Coalition of Canada. “A little bit of flexibility at the ministry of health, a little more consistency in their policies, would save lives. It’s that simple.”

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The group also spoke of many other cancer patients who could not travel to the Legislature today and who asked the advocates to keep up the pressure on their behalf. Some are spending thousands of dollars monthly on federally approved chemotherapy that the health system is supposed to provide; some don't have the money; some are begging their insurance companies to cover hospital-based chemotherapy.

"Imagine the nightmare," said Ms Savage, "knowing the chemotherapy that could keep you alive is just out of reach because the ministry cannot get its act together. Surely nobody has a goal to prevent oncologists from doing their best for patients."

The group urged the government to act immediately to correct the inconsistent policies about exceptional access to new cancer drugs.

Section 8 Coverage

The Ontario government's public fact sheet¹ on the Section 8 Mechanism of the Ontario Drug Benefit Program states:

In rare circumstances, a person may be unable to use any of the drug products covered by the ODB program. In other cases, new drugs approved for sale in Canada but not yet covered by the ODB program may be, based on the prescriber's opinion, the only treatment available to improve a patient's health. In these exceptional circumstances, a request for special coverage of a non-listed drug product not normally covered under the ODB program can be made. This process is known as Section 8.

The Ministry approves approximately 75 per cent of these Section 8 requests² for a wide variety of medications, including oral chemotherapy. Cancer patients who take their chemotherapy as a pill, rather than intravenously, can readily access new treatments.

About the Cancer Advocacy Coalition

The Cancer Advocacy Coalition is Canada's only full-time, registered, non-profit cancer group dedicated to citizen advocacy. The CACC is not a charity and operates on unrestricted grants from sponsors based on guidelines that ensure the organization's autonomy. For more information visit our website at www.canceradvocacy.ca

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¹ Ontario Drug Benefit: Section 8 Mechanism Fact Sheet.

² ODB Annual Report, 2004