



Thursday, June 4, 2020

The Honourable Christine Elliott, MPP, Deputy Premier and Minister of Health
Ministry of Health
5th Floor
777 Bay Street
Toronto, ON
M7A 2J3

Subject: Follow up on Immediate Policy Action and Flexibility for Cancer Patients during COVID-19

Dear Minister Elliott,

We are writing to you to bring to your attention a matter of increasingly urgent attention regarding the need for catastrophic drug coverage relief during the COVID-19 pandemic period.

On behalf of members of the CanCertainty Coalitions, including over 30 cancer patient groups, oncologists, pharmacists, and health policy advisors, we appreciate the detailed response from the Ministry of Health related to the concerns raised by our member organizations and allied cancer professionals. We shared details of the Ministry's letter with Coalition members and have collected their feedback.

While collectively we acknowledge actions taken will offer limited help to some cancer patients in Ontario, many issues remain – particularly with regard to the necessary shift toward take-home cancer medications and out-of-pocket expenses (Trillium deductibles for these cancer medications) that amount to thousands of dollars. This shift to treatments taken at home is happening at the same time as many working-age families are losing their employment income and the employment benefits that have previously included drug coverage.

In short, we see the need for Ontario to offer catastrophic relief from drug costs in this time of real catastrophe for Ontario's working families, as outlined below.

1. CanCertainty recommendation: Patients need immediate, short-term relief of upfront Trillium deductibles for catastrophic drug expenses. (Our recommendation was to provide emergency relief/waiver of upfront deductible charges at the pharmacy.)

Ministry response: On May 13, the Ministry of Health announced that households can now ask that their deductible be reassessed based on their projected income for either year that overlaps the benefit year. This was done to address job losses due to COVID-19, but also address a leave due to a cancer diagnosis or other condition.

Our concerns: While this adjustment to the reference year will benefit cancer (and other) patients who experience loss to their household income, it still does not address that patients still must pay 4% of (the reduced) total household income as an out of pocket cost for drug costs.

We note that a working age family of four with a reduced total household income of \$50,000 must still find \$2,000 per year, paid as \$500 out of pocket per quarter in upfront deductible costs before Ontario's catastrophic drug program provides any financial relief whatsoever.

While the Ministry's recent announcement of the waiver of co-pays for ODB recipients provides immediate out-of-pocket relief for all seniors and others enrolled in ODB, it does nothing to help those faced with much higher out-of-pocket expenses -- notably the 4% deductible paid by those under age 65, our working-age population, who face excessive drug costs through no fault of their own.

Again, we urge the Ministry to consider immediate relief of upfront Trillium deductibles to align with the urgent needs brought upon by the current financial catastrophe.

2. CanCertainty recommendation: Cancer patients need assurance that cancer treatment algorithms will be flexible (in the short- and medium-term) when their treatment pathways are changed due to COVID-19 safety measures.

Ministry response: The Ministry has been working the Ontario Health – CCO and clinicians to ensure patients receive undisrupted and timely access to cancer treatments, including interim measures of using take-home cancer treatments.

Our concerns: The need for short- and medium-term flexibility to reimbursed treatment pathways was not directly addressed. This continues to be a need to which patients need assurance – for example, whether a 2nd line therapy could be used in 1st line (and the 1st line drug used as 2nd line). In the past we have seen specific eligibility criteria strictly enforced in Ontario. We recommend this concern be addressed by a statement of reassurance from the Exceptional Access Program as an ethical responsibility to patients whose treatment pathway is being shifted due to COVID-19.

3. CanCertainty recommendation: Patients need support transitioning to public drug programs as they/their families lose employer benefits.

Ministry response: During the pandemic, applications to Trillium can now be submitted through fax or email and enrollment times have been reduced through more frequent verification of income with Canada Revenue Agency.

Our concerns: While expediting the application submission process is welcomed, patients approved for coverage by Trillium still face significant out-of-pocket costs for the take-home cancer treatments they need to treat their cancer. In addition, given the complexity of the Trillium application process, ease of application and real-time assistance must be prioritized. Our coalition members also noted that very few patients in 2020 have access to fax machines at home.

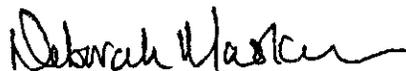
4. CanCertainty recommendation: Currently enrolled patients in Ontario’s public drug programs need drug funding renewal processes to be streamlined.

Ministry response: The Exceptional Access Program approvals that expire between May 1 and August 31, 2020, will be extended for 90 days from the date listed on the approval letter.

No concern: *This is good news for patients that will enable the continuation of therapy.*

Much more needs to be done for cancer patients in Ontario to address loss of employment benefits, loss of income, and catastrophic drug expenses. We are seeking the opportunity to meet (virtually) to collaborate with the Ministry of Health on solutions to ensure that all cancer patients can access and afford effective take-home cancer treatments during what has become both a health and a financial catastrophe for families in Ontario.

Sincerely,



Robert Bick and Deb Maskens
Co-founders, CanCertainty Coalition

cc:

- David Schachow, Director, Drug Programs Delivery Branch, Ontario Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care
- Harpreet Bassi, Director, Health Policy, Ontario Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care
- Rana Shamoon, Director, Health Policy, Office of Premier of Ontario

About the CanCertainty Coalition

The CanCertainty Coalition is the united voice of 30+ Canadian patient groups, cancer health charities, and caregiver organizations from across the country, joining together with oncologists and cancer care professionals to significantly improve the affordability and accessibility of take-home cancer treatments. For more information, visit www.CanCertainty.com.

CanCertainty Coalition Members

- Aplastic Anemia and Myelodysplasia Association of Canada
- Best Medicines Coalition
- Bladder Cancer Canada
- Brain Tumour Foundation of Canada
- Canadian Breast Cancer Network
- Canadian Cancer Action Network
- Canadian Liver Foundation
- Canadian Skin Cancer Foundation
- Canadian Skin Patient Alliance
- Cancer Advocacy Coalition of Canada
- Cancer Fight Club

- Carcinoid Neuroendocrine Tumour Society of Canada
- Chronic Myelogenous Leukemia Society of Canada
- CLL Patient Advocacy Group
- Colorectal Cancer Canada
- Gastrointestinal Society
- GIST Sarcoma Life Raft Group Canada
- Hope and Cope
- Kidney Cancer Canada
- Leukemia and Lymphoma Society of Canada
- Lung Cancer Canada
- Lymphoma Canada
- Melanoma Network of Canada
- Myeloma Canada
- Ovarian Cancer Canada
- Pancreatic Cancer Canada
- Rethink Breast Cancer
- Save Your Skin
- Testicular Cancer Canada
- The Canadian CML Network
- Thyroid Cancer Canada
- Young Adult Cancer Canada

Supporting Organizations

- Anal Cancer Support Group
- Canadian Breast Cancer Support Fund
- Canadian Cancer Survivor Network
- Glad of Hope
- Life Saving Therapies Network