



Tuesday, April 14, 2020

The Honourable John Haggie, M.L.A., Minister of Health and Community Service
Department of Health and Community Service
1st Floor, West Block
Confederation Building
St. John's, NL A1B 4J6

Subject: Request for Immediate Policy Action and Flexibility for Cancer Patients during COVID-19

Dear Minister,

On behalf of cancer patient groups, oncologists, and health policy advisors who are concerned about eliminating barriers to accessing treatment during the COVID-19 pandemic, we are writing to you to recommend some immediate financial relief and flexibility for cancer patients in Newfoundland and Labrador.

1. **Patients need immediate, short-term relief from NLPD out-of-pocket co-payments for catastrophic drug expenses.**
 - Currently, once enrolled in the NLPD Assurance and Access Programs, cancer patients facing catastrophic drug costs for Take Home Cancer Treatments (THCTs) must pay out-of-pocket payments based upon the family's income of either 5, 10 or 15 percent, which can amount to thousands of dollars for potentially life-saving medications. In the current emergency, ***we recommend that any co-payments for these programs be deferred for six months to ensure no patient faces delay or goes without treatment*** – or needs to choose between essentials like food and rent and their cancer treatment.
 - While we are focusing on the needs of Newfoundland and Labrador's cancer patients, this financial relief is required by every household facing catastrophic drug costs at this time and we would recommend your Ministry adopts the change broadly.

2. **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.**
 - Oncologists are needing to change treatment regimens to ensure patient safety and keep as many people out of hospitals and cancer centres. For example, some cancer patients are being prescribed Take-Home Cancer Treatments (THCTs) to avoid the risks of infusion centres and to reduce the chance of hospitalization due to immune-related side effects of immunotherapies. Other patients are being asked to change treatment schedules, dosing, or to take breaks in therapy.

- While these decisions are being made to mitigate COVID-related risks, patients' treatment sequencing must be flexible to ensure they receive the best possible treatment in the future. For example, an immunotherapy option that would normally be reimbursed in the first line only should be available in the second line for those patients whose treatment plans are adjusted due to COVID-19 precautions. This flexibility must be adopted by Eastern Health Cancer Care and related programs for Take-Home Cancer Treatments.

3. Patients need support transitioning to public drug programs as they lose employer benefits.

- Given the unprecedented number of households who have lost their employment benefits including drug coverage, we anticipate the need for communication in public briefings and to streamline and expedite enrolment processes for new applicants to the NLPD Assurance and Access programs.
- As you are aware, Newfoundland and Labrador's coverage for Take-Home Cancer Treatments has relied heavily on private insurance as the first payor. Cancer patients will need support to quickly transition to public payer programs to ensure cancer treatment that has been covered in the past by private insurance is not interrupted or delayed. Particularly for life-threatening diseases such as cancer, patients will need help bridging coverage and maintaining therapy as prescribed.

Thank you for your attention to the issues and recommendations addressed in this letter. We look forward to hearing back from your office on appropriate steps to be taken in the short term to maintain high-quality and evidence-based cancer care in these coming months. We applaud your action to extend approvals of Special Access medications for patients already made. On behalf of all of our member organizations, we thank you for your government's commitment to the health, safety and well-being of the people of Newfoundland and Labrador.

Sincerely,



Robert Bick and Deb Maskens
Co-founders, CanCertainty Coalition

cc:

- Janet Templeton, Program Director, Eastern Health Cancer Care
- Dr. Jehan Siddiqui, Clinical Chief, Easter Health Cancer Care
- Dr. Bruce Colwell, President, Canadian Association of Medical Oncologists

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