

## **Patients will lose in “Drug War”**

By: Denis Morrice

The most important viewpoint – that of the patient – has been missing in recent articles such as “Drug war crossfire”, the “High stakes showdown”, “Marketing the drug culture”, patent protection and the various opinions expressed through the media by the pharmaceutical industry, generic drug makers and think tank experts.

Canadians who rely on medications for their quality of life are not all that interested in the policy process or bureaucratic red tape. They are interested in access and outcomes. And access to the best medicines is frequently an integral part of a positive outcome.

We know through the federally funded Canadian Institute for Health Information that one of the most significant advances in healthcare today is the development and improvement of medications. Therefore it is ludicrous that we have drugs openly available in one province, restricted in another and not listed at all in another. How can we ever claim to possess a fully functioning Canadian healthcare system when a child in PEI cannot get a drug that a child in Alberta can?

There is also an overwhelming un-truth that needs to be debunked on the issue of so-called “me-too” drugs. Cynics claim there is a prevalence of “copycat” drugs on the market. In the real world, advances in medications are not generally breakthroughs. In almost all cases, advances are incremental, each improvement building upon the previous one.

There is no question that innovation – of both the incremental and breakthrough variety - leads to new and better medications. This is an unassailable fact that we need to respect and protect. Patients don’t care about how long patents are in place. We know there is no cure-all, which is why we care about the next generation of medications. However, without a vibrant climate for R&D we won’t get that innovation.

Some claim the cost of medications has risen due to the lack of generic drugs on the market. This is simply not true. The truth is, drug prices are only a small portion of the increase – the real impact is due to shifts in demographics and health status; changes in physician prescribing behaviour; greater reliance on newer drug therapy to replace other costly, medical interventions; and more diseases being treatable with medications.

According to a recent study by the federal Patent Medicines Prices Review Board, the price of generic medications in Canada are among the highest in the world, which means it is not a lack of generics which contribute to higher prices in Canada.

This also brings to question why there is a price review board for patent medicines, but not one, as recommended by the Romanow report, for generic drug manufacturers.

Equally valid is why the Common Drug Review, implemented by the First Ministers, is resulting in more red tape, not less. Even with the Common Drug Review, we have

provincial formularies working at odds, so patients in Ottawa and Winnipeg may not be able to access the same medications. We have the generics and the pharmaceutical companies going head-to-head over patents. And most recently, we have Big PhARMA in the US launching their utterly absurd campaign that Canadian Internet prescriptions are the next front in cyber terrorism.

If the Canadian Pharmacists Association and respective pharmacist licensing bodies are not prepared to do something about Canadian Internet pharmacies, then why not save billions of dollars in Canada and have the doctor prescribe direct from the manufacturer.

Similarly with Direct-to-Consumer-Advertising (DCTA) – advertising is not the issue, education is. Let patients take more responsibility for their health by empowering them with information and solid educational material.

What Canadians need is safe and timely access to the best medicines. But it must also be fair and equitable, which means, once approved by Health Canada a drug should be available to every Canadian in every province or territory. Medication is a critical tool for a doctor. Limiting access to this tool is like asking a carpenter to build a house without a hammer.

All the issues and debate around Pharmacare is enough to make one dizzy. But the bottom line, amidst all this noise, should be the well being of Canadian patients. It's about the right drug, to the right person, at the right price, at the right time.

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