

Atlantic Blue Cross: Directing patient-physician decision making

By: Linda Wilhelm

Atlantic Blue Cross (ABC) stepped out of their boardroom and into the rheumatologists' office defying the principle of patient-physician decision making this year. In a letter dated March 1, 2004, ABC made Enbrel the first line treatment over Remicade for people with Rheumatoid Arthritis (RA). The decision to triage patients with RA requiring biologics should have the doctors and their professional organization, The Canadian Rheumatology Association (CRA), raging. ABC's reasoning is that Remicade "can cost up to \$50,000" annually. The word "can" is paramount in this sentence, since the majority of patients prescribed Remicade do not incur costs anywhere near \$50,000. ABC tempered their decision by announcing in the same letter that they will cover Enbrel for Ankylosing Spondylitis and Psoriatic Arthritis.

Linda Wilhelm, Access to Medications Co-chair, met with Carla Ryan, Director, Provider Affairs with ABC and two of her co-workers on May 29, 2004 to discuss the decision and its implications. Substantive evidence to support the decision was not forthcoming. It appears the decision is purely an economic one that defies the principle of patient-physician decision-making.

This is wrong. If the data exists then ABC should share it. Even if there is a small difference in price, in Canada the health of the patient is the determining factor not economics. If you pay insurance premiums, surely you should be able to access the best medication through consultation with your doctor and not have an insurance company or government drug program telling you what is appropriate. We are not living in the United States.

CAPA's position is that insurance companies and governments have no place dictating best medications to rheumatologists and their patients. Treatment options are patient specific and must be made between the physician and patient. ABC is not part of the equation. ABC says they consulted with rheumatologists who had no problem with the decision. ABC said that if treatment with Enbrel failed, Remicade would be considered as an option. The word play is significant: *Would be considered*, rather than Remicade *will be an option*. ABC is not giving guarantees.

This is a huge step backward for people with arthritis, who fought the good fight for access to biologics. In fact, in Newfoundland the fight continues as people living there have not yet been given access to biologics through their provincial drug plan. And, although the government of Prince Edward Island has decided to cover biologics, there are delays in determining criteria and Islanders are still waiting.

If Atlantic Blue Cross's decision goes unchallenged, the implications are that other insurance companies and governments will follow in a similar fashion. People from coast to coast to coast in Canada must speak out. Rheumatologists and the CRA need to come forward and voice their objections to ABC's decision and side with their patients on this issue.

For additional information on provincial drug plans, see Provincial Drug Plans: Population coverage and cost containment strategies – compiled by Elizabeth Rode at Ward Health Strategies in this edition of CAPA Voices and Biologics available in Canada.