

MS Society of Canada, Manitoba Division
Drug Cost Reimbursement Position Statement
Prepared for Information Meeting
Legislative Building
Sept. 26th, 1997

Introduction

Honourable Mr. Praznik, fellow panelists, and citizens of Manitoba:

The Multiple Sclerosis Society of Canada, Manitoba Division believes we must achieve Pharmacare coverage of new treatments for multiple sclerosis, so that people with MS have affordable treatment options. Betaseron has been approved for use in Canada for two years, but due to its prohibitive cost, it has been inaccessible to most people. Last year, the Provincial Government was advised by the Drug Standards and Therapeutics Committee to reject an application to place Betaseron on the Pharmacare benefits list.

We believe this decision must be reversed. To this end, we have undertaken letter writing and petition campaigns urging the Government to reverse their decision. On July 30th, we met with the Minister of Health, presenting him with over 3000 names of Manitobans supporting us in our campaign. We left this meeting with a positive impression and felt the minister might reconsider this decision. However, to date the decision has not been reversed.

Almost everybody knows somebody with MS in Manitoba. MS is the most common central nervous system disorder to affect young adults. Often just as your life and career are beginning to take off, the disease can attack without warning, causing debilitating paralysis. It can affect your speech, your ability to walk, and your sight. These are only some of the possible effects. Women are affected almost twice as often as men. Most people with MS are unable to continue full time work within 5 yrs of diagnosis. People with MS are in need of a treatment that can help reduce the severity of MS and thus help them stay actively involved in their communities.

Betaseron and Copaxone are both possible treatments for people with relapsing-remitting MS. Copaxone was just recently approved for use in Canada. If you were a candidate for either one of these treatments, but you were unable to access them, how might you feel? Frustrated and disappointed, no doubt. Perhaps even defeated, given the daily pain and frustration you may already be dealing with. But you may also feel angry knowing that if you lived in BC or Ontario or Quebec, the option of accessing the breakthrough drug Betaseron would be open to you. Those provinces have chosen to extend special coverage to this new treatment.

The Manitoba Division of the Multiple Sclerosis Society is aware that our government is concerned about controlling the cost of health care as well as assuring that residents receive the most effective treatments possible. It is important for us to keep in mind that with these drugs, people with relapsing-remitting MS may be able to stay in the workforce. They may be able to stay out of hospital. They may be able to continue participating fully in life with minimal technical assistance. These are important indirect benefits that must be considered when weighing the costs and benefits of covering expensive new medications.

The Manitoba Division of the Multiple Sclerosis Society believes it is very appropriate for Betaseron to be approved for reimbursement in Manitoba in the light of the approval decisions in Ontario, Quebec and British Columbia, and previous approvals in 13 other jurisdictions. As well, clear guidelines exist for the prescribing and monitoring of the drug. A similar process could be developed for Copaxone and future innovative drug treatments on the horizon.

The Manitoba Division of the Multiple Sclerosis Society of Canada urges the Manitoba Government to approve Betaseron and Copaxone for reimbursement as soon as possible. In addition, we request the opportunity to contribute to any future decision-making about new treatments for people with MS. We believe that it is crucial that the interests of people who have MS be heard.