

May 21, 2003

Gary Doer,
Leader, Manitoba New Democratic Party
Campaign Headquarters
Unit J, 359 Johnson Avenue
Winnipeg MB R2L 0J2

Dear Mr. Doer,

On behalf of the Multiple Sclerosis Society of Canada Manitoba Division, I would like to take the opportunity of the election campaign to let you know about some of the current issues of importance to the more than 3,000 Manitobans living with MS. Typically diagnosed between the ages of 20 and 40, MS is the most common neurological condition affecting young adults in Canada. Manitoba has one of the highest incidences of the disease in the country.

At this time, one of our major concerns is the need for appropriate long-term housing options for young adults with high care needs. While most people with MS continue to function in the community for many years, unfortunately some progress to the stage where their care needs are such that they can no longer remain in their own homes. Currently their only alternative is placement in a personal care home alongside residents who are much older and at a different stage in their lives. This is clearly an inappropriate alternative for people sometimes as young as 30 or 40 years old.

We have been working on this issue in Winnipeg with a number of other disability organizations whose members also face this problem. We are pleased that your government, through the Department of Family Services and Housing, Manitoba Health and the Winnipeg Regional Health Authority, is supporting our efforts to establish an integrated apartment complex with the provision of day and night on-site support services. We hope that this will be the model for other similar projects, not only in Winnipeg but also in the rural and northern areas of the province where people also want to remain in their own community close to family and friends. We trust that your party will continue to support such important initiatives.

Another housing concern is the general shortage of affordable, accessible housing throughout the province. MS is a progressive condition and over time many people, while still able to live independently, experience increasing levels of disability. Many are also eventually unable to continue working and can face significant reductions in their incomes. Difficulty finding somewhere to live that meets both their physical needs and financial circumstances is a common problem. We welcome the programs recently introduced under the Affordable Housing Initiative and hope that the NDP will continue to address this serious need.

Four new treatments that have been shown to slow the progression of MS in some people are now approved for reimbursement under the Manitoba Pharmacare program.

We are extremely pleased with this development that has assured people with MS affordable access to these drugs. However, because of the high cost of these medications most people have to pay their Pharmacare deductible in one lump sum before they can fill their prescription. This can pose a considerable financial burden. For some people this has meant delaying obtaining the medicine until they have saved enough money; others have had to take out loans to cover the payment in order to begin or continue treatment. Current MS research indicates that the earlier these treatments are started the better the results and prognosis for the individual; this ultimately also translates into fewer demands on the health care system.

We have long advocated the introduction of a time payment option for the Pharmacare deductible to help alleviate this situation. During the last election campaign your party indicated to us that it would support such an option. We have since had discussions with the Minister of Health and Manitoba Health officials about this possibility. We were hopeful that such a program would soon be introduced; however progress appears to have stalled. We hope that the NDP will continue to support this initiative and make every effort to ensure its implementation so that Manitobans can obtain the treatments they require in a timely and affordable manner.

We welcomed the provincial disability strategy as outlined in the white paper *Full Citizenship*. We view the appointment of a Minister Responsible for Persons with Disabilities, the holding of an annual Disability Issues Roundtable with the community, the creation of the Disability Issues Office and other steps that have been taken to implement the strategy as positive developments. We hope that your party will remain committed to this strategy and take further measures to remove barriers and enable people with disabilities to participate fully as equal citizens in the life of the province.

Thank you for taking the time to read about some of our concerns. We hope that we can continue to count on your party to address the needs of Manitobans living with MS, as well as other chronic conditions and disabilities. Please forward any questions or response to Sharon Segal, Social Action Coordinator, MS Society of Canada, Manitoba Division.

Yours sincerely,

Dave Horne
Chair of the Board
MS Society of Canada, Manitoba Division

cc. Drew Caldwell, Minister of Family Services & Housing, Minister Responsible for Persons with Disabilities
Dave Chomiak, Minister of Health