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Arthritis advocates want drugs OK'd

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The newly elected Saskatchewan Party is being asked to reverse a decision made by the previous government not to pay for three biologic drugs used to treat a debilitating form of arthritis.

On Oct. 7 Saskatchewan Health decided against including these drugs in the provincial formulary. That decision is in direct contravention of recommendations provided by the Common Drug Review, Cheryl Koehn told reporters on Wednesday.

Koehn, president of the non-profit education and advocacy organization Arthritis Consumer Experts (ACE), was in Regina to lobby on behalf of Saskatchewan arthritis patients for equal access to treatment as guaranteed under the principles of Medicare.

"This decision flies in the face of all evidence-based decision-making. We must protect the basic human rights of all Canadians, regardless of which province they live in," Koehn said.

"The research data tells us that these biologic response modifiers are the only effective medications available to treat the most severe forms of ankylosing spondylitis and this treatment has been vetoed by Saskatchewan Health to the detriment of patients across the province."

As a result people living in Saskatchewan with this inflammatory disease have absolutely no access to biologic medications to manage their disease unless they pay out of pocket.

The cost is about \$15,000 to \$20,000 a year per person, Koehn said, noting that there are about 5,000 Saskatchewan residents suffering from ankylosing spondylitis who would benefit from these treatments.

"What has been created by this decision is a second class of citizen -- those who are not afforded the treatment they need to manage their disease and maintain their quality of life," Koehn said.

"Our universal health-care system should not discriminate unfairly against arthritis patients."

Ankylosing spondylitis affects one in every 200 Canadians, typically between the ages of 15 and 40. It is a chronic inflammatory form of arthritis that attacks the spine, Koehn said, noting arthritis is invasive, in some instances debilitating and disabling.

A spokesperson for Saskatchewan Health said on Wednesday that the department is reviewing that matter and will be making a decision over the next couple of months.

But Saskatchewan isn't the only province not paying for these drugs. Health departments in British Columbia, New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, P.E.I., Newfoundland and Labrador, Yukon, the Northwest Territories and Nunavut currently do not provide coverage, Koehn said.

The decision to deny access to these drugs is a potential human rights violation, she added.

"It is time that all arthritis patients in Canada enjoyed the same basic human rights as those living with other diseases," Koehn said.

"There is an opportunity here to do the right thing scientifically, medically, morally and legally."

If nothing is done to rectify the wrong done to arthritis patients, Koehn warned the provincial government could be facing a human rights complaint or possible litigation.