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## Alberta urged to pay for arthritis drugs

### Medications still under review

BY MICHELLE LANG, CALGARY HERALD FEBRUARY 19, 2009 COMMENTS (20)

Alberta's funding for arthritis drugs is "lagging behind" most other Canadian jurisdictions, according to a lobby group that is calling on the province to pay for two therapies to treat the disease.

Arthritis Consumer Experts said Wednesday that two years after the federal Common Drug Review recommended governments pick up the tab for Rituxan to treat rheumatoid arthritis, Alberta is still reviewing the medication.

The treatment receives public funding in all other provinces, except Manitoba and Prince Edward Island.

The organization is also calling on Alberta to pay for a second medication, Remicade, to treat spinal arthritis and psoriatic arthritis.

"It's so obvious what needs to be done," said Quincey Kirschner of Arthritis Consumer Experts. "We're saying it's time for Alberta to take this seriously. It's been under review for two years with no status update."

But representatives with Alberta Health said the department is still considering whether the medications should receive public insurance coverage, through Blue Cross, for the conditions.

"They are still under review," said Howard May, a spokesman for Alberta Health. "Complex decisions take time."

Rituxan and Remicade are part of a pricey new class of pharmaceutical known as biologics, which doctors say can be effective at treating arthritis when traditional drugs fail.

Funding for arthritis therapies has been in the spotlight since last summer when the province reversed its controversial decision to deny funding for two biologics to treat spinal arthritis.

Now rheumatoid arthritis patients like Sandie Ursel, a 68-year-old resident of Pincher Creek, hope the government will approve Blue Cross coverage of Rituxan to treat their condition. Ursel can't afford the \$19,000 annual bill for Rituxan, but managed to receive the drug for free through a program at Foothills Hospital --until she no longer qualified.

She has tried several other biologics but said the drug was the only one that provided her substantial relief.

"It's outrageous that Alberta isn't paying for it," says Ursel, who now has to use a power wheelchair to go grocery shopping. "I get really mad . . . and, in the meantime, I feel terrible."

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