November 9, 2006

Hon. George Abbott
Minister of Health
Parliament Buildings
Victoria BC
V8V 1X4

sent via email to:
Hlth.health@gov.bc.ca
original mailed

Dear Minister Abbott:

As part of the Better Pharmacare Coalition, thank you for meeting with us over the past year. Representatives of Arthritis Consumer Experts, Canadian Patient Alliance and The Arthritis Society, British Columbia and Yukon Division, are pleased to see the Ministry acknowledge the burden of arthritis for individuals and communities. At our meeting with you in April 2006, you invited each l coalition member to keep you abreast of new medications to treat the people they represent. For this reason, we would like to bring your attention to two new medications that have recently received their notice of compliance (NOC) from Health Canada in the treatment of moderate to severe rheumatoid arthritis: abatacept (Orencia®) and rituximab (Rituxan®).

- abatacept works by blocking the activation of T-cells, a specific type of immune cell that is found in the joints of persons with RA and is important in the development of inflammation and subsequent joint damage.

- rituximab works by targeting and reducing a specific type of immune cell, called B cells. Although scientists do not fully understand how the medication works in the body, the result is a prolonged decrease in inflammation.

Each of these two new biologics works in entirely different ways than the current biologics listed on the BC PharmaCare formulary. This is important because through research we know that the disease involves a number of different molecules that cause or promote the inflammatory process of rheumatoid arthritis – the one symptom that is so devastating and damaging in rheumatoid arthritis. Moreover, research shows that there continues to be a significant unmet need for new treatments with approximately 60% of people with rheumatoid arthritis who have tried one or several of the three biologic response modifiers currently on the market have not responded well (or responded well enough) to them. In other words, more than half of people with inflammatory arthritis do not have their symptoms alleviated with the current biologics.

These new medications also offer people with arthritis new choices for administration. One is a one time per month infusion, a process that can be done at home if the patient chooses; the other is an infusion in each of the first two weeks, and then re-treatment every six to nine months. The new administration options offer advantages for certain patients, such as those with significant mobility challenges and those working and unable to take time off for treatment.

The Food and Drug Administration in the United States have already approved both of these medications, and randomized controlled clinical trials have indicated that both abatacept and rituximab proved effective at controlling signs and symptoms of rheumatoid arthritis and improving quality of life in people with the disease. Furthermore, the early pharmaco-economic analysis indicates these two medications will be the same or lower price than current biologics.

For the above reasons, we urge you, as Minister of Health, to expedite PharmaCare's review of these two products. To date, BC PharmaCare's performance record on the review of medications to treat inflammatory arthritis has been unsatisfactory, particularly with regard to arthritis medications. Expediting the review will serve to ensure that British Columbians living with rheumatoid arthritis – **approximately 28,000 individuals** – will have critical treatment options that will reduce the pain, deformity and work disability associated with delayed treatment. In addition, access to these medications will improve quality of life, allowing people with rheumatoid arthritis to fully participate in their families, communities and society.

Sincerely,

Cheryl Koehn
President
Arthritis Consumer Experts
Person with rheumatoid arthritis

Ron Woznow, PhD
Executive Director
The Arthritis Society,
BC and Yukon Division

Colleen Maloney
BC Steering Committee Representative
Canadian Arthritis Patient Alliance
Person with rheumatoid arthritis

Anne Dooley
President
Canadian Arthritis Patient Alliance

Encls.

C.c. Bob Nakagawa, Assistant Deputy Minister of BC PharmaCare

Note: Please address reply correspondence to Ms. Cheryl Koehn, Arthritis Consumer Experts, 910 B Richards Street, Vancouver, BC V6B 3C1.