

NOTES

BY KATHIE LYNAS

Call for political action to address continuing drug shortages

Liberal Parliamentarians have joined forces with pharmacists, physicians and the pharmaceutical industry to call for political action to address the ongoing prescription-drug shortage — including a parliamentary inquiry to examine the problem and propose solutions.

Liberal Health Critic Dr. Hedy Fry and some Liberal colleagues from the House of Commons and Senate hosted a roundtable in Ottawa on November 24, 2011 — bringing together representatives from the Canadian Pharmacists Association (CPhA), the Canadian Medical Association (CMA) and other health organizations, as well as from the brand-name and generic drug industries.

The shortages have been an issue in Canada for the past couple of years, and are affecting a range of pharmaceuticals — from antibiotics and common therapies for heart disease to cancer drugs. The federal government isn't taking the issue seriously enough, says Dr. Fry. "Our government has done absolutely nothing about these drug shortages. As a physician, I am very concerned; this is fundamentally an issue of patient care. What are



people with chronic diseases or those undergoing chemotherapy supposed to do when the drugs they need aren't available?”

The US administration and legislators have been far more proactive, she says, noting that Congress held hearings on the issue and that the President asked the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) to take steps to fast-track approval of substitute drugs or new drugs, or new processes for manufacturing.

The Liberal-led roundtable produced 3 main recommendations, one of which was a call for the House of Commons health committee to conduct a public inquiry. CPhA agrees this is needed, says Jeff Morrison, director of government relations and public affairs for the association. “We think this would be a good opportunity to get all

the stakeholders at the table in a transparent forum, being accountable for the shortage situation.”

Another recommendation is for the government to raise the issue at the World Health Organization, given that the shortages are a global phenomenon. “We are also asking the government to help fund a third-party organization to monitor drugs on an ongoing basis, to identify where shortages might occur and the causes,” says Dr. Fry. “While warnings about shortages are good and help pharmacists and other health professionals to plan, these are just temporary steps. We need longer-term solutions.”

CPhA agrees it would be helpful to have the government provide at least some of the funding for monitoring and for advice on possible substitute drugs. Meanwhile,

a short-term solution for sharing information on pending drug shortages has been developed, explains Mr. Morrison. The brand name and generic drug associations will be posting alerts on shortages through websites out of Saskatchewan and Quebec.

The website addresses are: http://druginfo.usask.ca/healthcare_professional/canadian_drug_shortages.php and www.vendredipm.ca. (An English version of the latter site, www.fridaypm.ca, is also planned.)

For the longer term, CPhA is working with other stakeholders to develop recommendations on potential Health Canada regulatory changes that would speed up approvals of drugs and manufacturing process changes, to help address some of the root causes of shortages. ■

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