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Canada ranks near the bottom in usage of newer cancer drugs

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New study reinforces need for national catastrophic drug plan for cancer patients.

In a newly released report comparing international usage of prescription drugs, Canada ranks thirteenth among 14 countries for cancer drugs launched within the last five years. The study, conducted for the UK Secretary of State for Health, compared 14 countries for their usage of 14 categories of prescription drugs to determine whether the UK is adequately providing for the health needs of its citizens. In Canada, low usage of newer cancer drugs means that patients might bounce from one outdated treatment to another trying to achieve results that the unavailable drug would have provided.

In the oncology category of the newly released report, "Extent and Causes of International Variations in Drug Usage," the UK ranked twelfth, prompting its government to announce a (pnds stlg)50 million fund to start covering cancer drugs that were not yet approved by the country's National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE). At the other end of the spectrum, France, Austria and the US took the top ranking spots for use of newer cancer drugs, whereas New Zealand had the poorest showing after Canada.

According to Dr. Kong Khoo, Vice Chair of the Cancer Advocacy Coalition of Canada (CACC) and lead author of the CACC Report Card articles on access to cancer drugs, "the UK study confirms what we have been reporting for several years in the annual Report Card on Cancer in Canada. Our citizens do not have reasonable, timely access to the newest, most effective cancer drugs. For many, that reality means trying to pay for a treatment that is unaffordable, which creates an impossible choice: your health or financial solvency for your family."

The CACC has published comprehensive lists of the difference in drug coverage by province, and the growing reliance on private insurance to pay for cancer drugs. With a large number of uninsured and under-insured Canadians, especially post-retirement, the prospect of catastrophic drug cost is a growing threat.

"The Canadian Cancer Society strongly believes that all Canadians must have access to cancer drug treatments without financial hardship, no matter where they live in this country," says Aaron Levo, Acting Director, National Public Issues, Canadian Cancer Society. "During cancer treatment a person needs to focus on their health. It is not a time for a patient to worry about how they are going to pay for the drugs. This is simply unacceptable."

Jack Shapiro, Chair of the Canadian Cancer Action Network says that Canadians need universal, equitable and affordable cancer drug access. "Above all, cancer drug treatment should not impose added emotional strain or financial hardships on patients and their families. And stakeholders, including governments, need to develop strategies to increase the sustainability of cancer drug coverage."

Today, in light of Canada's extremely low ranking in the UK study, the Cancer Advocacy Coalition of Canada, Canadian Cancer Society and Canadian Cancer Action Network are calling on the Federal/Provincial/Territorial Ministers of Health to urgently pursue the creation of a national catastrophic drug plan for cancer patients.

Myeloma Canada is a member of the Canadian Cancer Action Network (CCAN), a volunteer-driven, incorporated organization uniting cancer-site patient organizations from across Canada under one umbrella, dedicated to ensuring patient interests remain a key priority on the national cancer agenda. For more information, or to access the full UK report on international variations in drug usage, visit the Canadian Cancer Action Network's website at www.ccanceraction.ca.