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Equality in Canada for Multiple Myeloma Patients

John Lemieux, President, Myeloma Canada, May 6, 2009

Myeloma Canada responds to Tom Blackwell's May 5th article in the National Post

Tom Blackwell's article has accurately captured the desperation of a number of Canadian cancer patients who may be forced to ignore certain legalities in order to gain access to Thalidomide. A formerly banned drug, Health Canada has now recognized Thalidomide as an effective, live-extending treatment for some patients with multiple myeloma, an incurable but treatable blood cancer.

As Mr. Blackwell also accurately notes, Thalidomide and newer drugs, such as Revlimid and Velcade, can add years to the lives of myeloma patients, stretching average survival to 4 to 5 years to as many as 10 years or more. Yet patients across Canada face fragmented, confusing and discriminatory drug payment policies which deny or unduly delay their access to these drugs because provincial health authorities often refuse responsibility to reimburse the cost of these drugs and to guarantee patients equal access to them.

Once Health Canada has approved a drug therapy that is proven to extend the lives of myeloma patients, as is the Case with Revlimid and Velcade, provincial health authorities must make timely decisions to list such drugs on their formularies. Delays of years, months or even weeks that are the result of bureaucratic processes compromise the already-shortened life expectancies of myeloma patients and their ability to take advantage of next-generation therapies. Timely and universal access, independent of a patient's financial means, is the real issue and is at the heart of Myeloma Canada's Time to Live Campaign.