

Access to Diabetes Medication: Time-to-Listing on Provincial Formularies



Background

There are over 4 million people living with diabetes in Canada. Diabetes is a chronic, progressive disease that affects the body's ability to regulate the amount of glucose (sugar) in the blood. It has no cure, but can be managed through education, support, healthy behaviour interventions, and medications. People with type 1 diabetes require daily injections or infusions of insulin to sustain life. People with type 2 diabetes often rely on one or more medications to achieve target blood glucose levels and minimize the risk of complications associated with the condition. Diabetes management in many cases also requires the use of appropriate glucose monitoring devices to safely dose medications.

Many Canadians rely on public drug programs to obtain the treatments they need to manage their medical conditions. Each province has its own unique drug plan. A new medication goes through several steps in the regulatory process before being added to a provincial drug plan and becoming available to people who are eligible for public coverage. Preclinical and clinical trials are undertaken before a drug manufacturer makes a product submission to Health Canada and receives a Notice of Compliance. Clinical and economic data on the medication under review are then considered by a multidisciplinary team through the Common Drug Review, a process that is managed by an independent, not-for-profit group called the Canadian Agency for Drugs and Technologies in Health (CADTH). The team submits a report to the Canadian Drug Expert Committee, who conducts a cost-benefit analysis and makes listing recommendations to participating provincial drug plans. Each provincial government is free to decide whether or not to list the medication and under what circumstances.

Challenges

The many review and approval phases to which a new medication is subject cause a significant time lag between a drug's development and the eventual ability of Canadians to access it through a provincial formulary.

Time-to-listing varies across the country, with several jurisdictions far exceeding a year's wait and many approaching 18 months to two years before listing (in contrast to only a few months for medications on most private plans). Though the data contained in the table on page 2 are not specific to diabetes medications, they demonstrate that Canada's process for reviewing, approving, and providing public coverage for prescription medications generally is complex and lengthy, and can delay access to necessary time-sensitive care.¹

Policy Implications

The extended period of time from drug approval to coverage is a challenge to people living with diabetes and a barrier to optimal health outcomes.¹ Those who are unable to get the most appropriate treatment options in a timely way often have difficulty managing their disease. Uncontrolled blood glucose can have very serious short and long-term health impacts and can result in debilitating and irreversible disease complications, such as heart attack, stroke, kidney failure, blindness, and amputation. Poor health is burdensome to individuals, families, and society at large. High and unnecessary costs are incurred from lost productivity and increased health-care system use due to diabetes and associated conditions.

Recommendations

Diabetes Canada strongly advises the undertaking of a thorough review and enhancement of the process by which prescription medications are approved for listing on provincial formularies. Concurrently, existing policies must ensure that people living with diabetes across Canada have access to the devices, supplies, services, education, and supports they require that allow them to effectively self-manage their disease.

References

1. Pharmacare Working Group. Better Pharmacare for Patients: Evaluating Policy Options. Ottawa, ON: Pharmacare Working Group, 2018. Retrieved from https://www.pharmacists.ca/cpha-ca/assets/File/cpha-on-the-issues/Better_Pharmacare_for_Patients.pdf
2. Data source: IQVIA Market Access Metrics Database, January 1, 2012, to March 31, 2023, data period. Analysis: The Conference Board of Canada.

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Province	Median time-to-listing for all drugs from Canadian Pharmaceutical Alliance to listing on provincial drug formulary (number of days) ²
British Columbia	168
Alberta	273
Saskatchewan	97
Manitoba	188
Ontario	169
New Brunswick	200
Nova Scotia	359
Prince Edward Island	662
Newfoundland and Labrador	336