

ORAL QUESTION—KEVIN O'REILLY, MLA FRAME LAKE

QUESTION 155-18(3): PHARMACARE AND PRESCRIPTION ACCESSIBILITY

FEBRUARY 23, 2018

MR. O'REILLY: Merci, monsieur le President. My questions are for the Minister of Health and Social Services. The introduction of a national pharmacare program would bring benefits to all in this country, including residents of the Northwest Territories, including things like national standards and maybe even some more money from the federal government. What is the position of our government on national pharmacare? Mahsi, Mr. Speaker.

MR. SPEAKER: Masi. Minister of Health and Social Services.

HON. GLEN ABERNETHY: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, I am a big supporter of a national pharmacare plan here, in Canada. We are the only first-world nation that has publicly-funded medicare that does not have publicly funded pharmacare. As a country, I think we need to make significant progress in that area.

At a national level, I would say that one of the largest champions of pharmacare is Dr. Eric Hoskins, who is actually the Minister of Health in the Province of Ontario. He has been pushing Ontario and pushing Ministers from across this country to work together to lobby and encourage the federal government to pursue pharmacare. He has pulled together meetings, like a meeting that was held during the last Health Ministers meeting, where the Canada Labour Congress came and met with all of us as Ministers and we all talked about the value and importance of a national pharmacare plan.

I have discussed the work that is being done at a national level with my Ministers both in this government and in the previous government. They have endorsed the work I am doing support Dr. Hoskins, and the Ministers to pursue pharmacare and encourage the federal government to pursue pharmacare, as well. Thank you.

MR. O'REILLY: I can honestly say I think that's the most positive response I have ever gotten in the House from a Minister, so congratulations. Thank you very much, and I appreciate the Minister's work on the issue. My sincere thanks.

So my next question here: in my statement I referred to the fact that some of our residents, particularly the working poor and young people, are not covered under existing programs for prescriptions. If we truly want our students to come back, we need to look at making sure that they can access prescription drugs, which are now covered in Ontario for young people, and the Minister knows that. So can the Minister tell us what our government is doing to ensure that those not currently covered are receiving necessary prescriptions?

HON. GLEN ABERNETHY: We know that our supplemental health program here in the Northwest Territories is a very generous program, but the Member is right, and the Member from Yellowknife Centre brought this up the other day. There are some gaps in this program. We are doing a review of our supplemental health programs here in the

Northwest Territories, and I intend to engage with the Standing Committee on Social Development in the coming months to discuss options to program reform. This will include actions that we can take in the short term, as well as approaches to substantial program reform over the longer term. I do caution all Members; this was attempted once before, and it went poorly, and it did not succeed. We are going to be forced to make difficult decisions in the best interests of all of our residents, but I think it's important that we work together to find a way to close this gap in an affordable, sustainable, and appropriate way.

MR. O'REILLY: Again, I want to thank the Minister. There are some difficult decisions to be made ahead, but we have to start that conversation. So joint drug buying programs are something that our government has participated in to help lower our expenditures on that side. Can the Minister update us on NWT's participation in national-provincial drug buying cooperatives and any analysis of their benefits which might be under way?

HON. GLEN ABERNETHY: Many, many years ago, the provinces came together under the direction of the Council of the Federation to form the Pan-Canadian Pharmaceutical Alliance to help control the high cost of drugs across this country. They have worked hard to identify and arrange relationships for group purchasing that has actually helped bring down the costs of many drugs, in particular many of the non-generics in this country. Since the last federal election, the federal government has joined on to the Pan-Canadian Pharmaceutical Alliance, which I think was an incredibly important step, as they have the ability to amend legislation and do things at a national level to affect the actual prices. We are working very closely with the Pan-Canadian Pharmaceutical Alliance. We are a member of the Pan-Canadian Pharmaceutical Alliance. We look forward to continuing to work together to bring down costs. We are a very small jurisdiction, but we still have a voice at the table.

MR. SPEAKER: Masi. Oral questions. Member for Frame Lake.

MR. O'REILLY: Merci, Monsieur le President. I seem to be on a real roll, here, so thanks again to the Minister for the work that he does on this issue. I know that he also participates in federal-provincial-territorial conferences and working groups. I mentioned earlier in my statement about the tendency of our federal government to promote so-called free trade agreements that extend protection for drug manufacturers, sometimes with little corresponding benefits. Can the Minister tell the House what positions our government has put forward in the so-called free trade agreement negotiations with regard to prescription drugs? Mahsi, Mr. Speaker.

HON. GLEN ABERNETHY: Recognizing that we are a small jurisdiction on the Pan-Canadian Pharmaceutical Alliance and that larger jurisdictions like Ontario, Alberta, BC, and even Quebec have a much larger impact on the drug purchasing in this country, we have endorsed the work that is being done by the Pan-Canadian Pharmaceutical Alliance in trying to control the price of drugs, including negotiations with pharmaceutical companies and others, both at a national and international level, and we continue to endorse the work they do and stand behind the work that they do and support the decisions that they have to make to bring down the costs for all Canadians. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

