

ORAL QUESTION—KEVIN O'REILLY, MLA FRAME LAKE

**QUESTION 820-18(3):
EXTENDED HEALTH BENEFITS PROGRAM REVIEW**

August 16, 2019

MR. O'REILLY: Merci, Monsieur le President. I pointed out in my statement earlier today that there have been a number of instances in which serious and not uncommon medical conditions are not eligible for healthcare supports under the specified disease conditions list through the extended health benefits program. The latest instance brought to me of non-coverage was with regard to autism. I mentioned how the NWT Autism Society has produced legal analysis that claims that non-coverage of these conditions is discriminatory. I would like to know from the Minister whether his office has had a chance to review this brief and what is the government's position on whether exclusion of some conditions from the specified disease conditions list is discriminatory. What is the government's position on whether exclusion of some conditions from eligibility under the specified disease conditions list is discriminatory? Mahsi, Mr. Speaker.

MR. SPEAKER: Masi. The Honourable Premier.

HON. BOB MCLEOD: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Just for clarification, autism is covered currently by the Extended Health Benefits program. However, we recognize that the Extended Health Benefits Policy is outdated and that we face issues with how the current eligibility criteria for the program are structured. A comprehensive review of the supplementary health benefits programs is underway. Some preliminary work has been done to determine what other jurisdictions have done to identify disadvantaged groups for increased supports. Moving forward, the department will be examining all aspects of need, to ensure distribution of our limited resources is not discriminatory.

MR. O'REILLY: Thanks to the Premier for clarifying that autism is covered. I know when I talked to people here in Yellowknife, when they called to find out whether autism was covered, the frontline staff said it was not, so there seems to be some confusion here. Regardless of the government's position on whether autism is covered or not, I would like to know from the Minister: does a comprehensive list exist of what's covered under the specified disease conditions, and will the Minister table that list in this House?

HON. BOB MCLEOD: There is a publicly available list of specified disease conditions, and this list is available on the Health and Social Services website. Over the years since 1988, the department received a number of requests that did not fall under the specified disease conditions schedule. Over time, exceptions were made to provide coverage for disease conditions that were not on the list, and, at one point, there were an additional 25 disease conditions being covered on an exceptions basis. In 2010, the department went forward to Cabinet to get approval for an additional 10 disease conditions to be included on the list. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

MR. O'REILLY: I want to thank the Premier for that information. There seems to be some confusion about what's covered and what's not, but I understand from what the

Premier said that there is a review that may have started, failed efforts in the past to review the extended health benefits programs, including the specified disease condition list. I would like to ask the Premier: what's the holdup, and when will this review really commence?

HON. BOB MCLEOD: As you know, the cost of pharmaceuticals is an ever-growing cost for the Government of the Northwest Territories and has enormous implications for the sustainability of our supplementary health benefit programs. When the Government of Canada began discussions with the provinces and territories on national pharmacare, we postponed the review until there were clearer indications as to Canada's position because of the implications a national program would have on our benefit programs.

The Advisory Council on National Pharmacare established by the federal government released a report earlier this summer on options for a national pharmacare program. The report was very broad and did not provide the clarity that would have guided the Government of the Northwest Territories moving forward. It is also unclear what next steps may occur, given the upcoming federal government election. It will remain important to align our efforts on supplementary health benefit reform with those occurring at the national level. We will need to wait until the dust settles after the federal election to see whether national pharmacare will move forward and what changes are coming before we make our own. Regardless, the work on the supplementary health benefit reform will be revived and continue into the next government.

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

MR. O'REILLY: Merci, Monsieur le President. Thanks to the Premier for that. There have been a lot of anxiety and unfavourable reactions in the past to efforts to review extended health benefits programs here. I would like to know what kind of preparation work is specifically being done and how our stakeholders are being properly informed and assured that this work is going to start soon. Mahsi, Mr. Speaker.

HON. BOB MCLEOD: Recognizing the impacts that supplementary health benefits coverage has for many in the Northwest Territories, public engagement will be carried out before any proposed changes are made. Before going out for public engagement, a certain amount of scoping and cross-jurisdictional research must be completed. Public awareness efforts will occur as part of any public engagement campaign carried out in the future. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.