

ORAL QUESTION—KEVIN O'REILLY, MLA FRAME LAKE

QUESTION 843-18(3): NATIONAL PHARMACARE AND THE NWT

August 21, 2019

MR. O'REILLY: Merci, Monsieur le President. My questions are for the Minister of Health and Social Services regarding the development of a national pharmacare program. First, could the Minister explain what our role was in relation to the national Advisory Council on the Implementation of National Pharmacare, and what our role will be going forward, especially with regard to prescription drug costs and improved health outcomes? Mahsi, Mr. Speaker.

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

HON. GLEN ABERNETHY: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. With respect to the national Advisory Council on the Implementation of National Pharmacare, we did have an opportunity to make presentation to the council, and we outlined the challenges of providing healthcare in the Northwest Territories. We outlined the different public benefit plans that we administer here in the Government of the Northwest Territories, our Extended Health Benefits. We talked about the trends over the last ten years so that they could see where some of the usage is or uptake in some of the prescription drugs that are being utilized here in the Northwest Territories. We also had an opportunity to share some observations of what we would like to see in a pharmacare plan for Canada.

We also had an opportunity, through the federal-provincial-territorial Ministers of Health meetings, to identify an FTP working group of staff that also had an opportunity to compile more information and make sure that the NWT perspective was included and share that with the advisory council through that means, as well.

I imagine that pharmacare is going to become an election issue at a federal level in this upcoming election. There is no pharmacare plan in place today. The federal government did get the report. We are watching very closely to see how they proceed with that. Regardless, Mr. Speaker, at the same time, the GNWT does actually participate in the Pan-Canadian Pharmaceutical Alliance, which basically conducts joint provincial, territorial, and federal negotiations for brand name and generic drugs in Canada to achieve greater value. We are trying to do things to help control and reduce costs of drugs.

I look forward, personally, to seeing a pharmacare plan in Canada. We are the only first-world country with a medicare plan that doesn't have pharmacare, and I think that it is time that the federal government in this country stood up and moved forward with pharmacare. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

MR. O'REILLY: I want to thank the Minister for that and his personal interest and commitment on moving this forward. Our Extended Health Benefits plan is based upon a list of medicines that are approved. The national proposal has developed an initial formula of essential drugs by 2022 and a full list by 2027. Can the Minister explain how

this list will apply to the NWT, and whether we will need to maintain a regional supplementary formulary to address any of our special needs?

HON. GLEN ABERNETHY: The national Advisory Council on the Implementation of National Pharmacare Report actually did include some recommendations as to what measures that the federal government should take with respect to a formulary. This advice, obviously, is going to be considered by the Government of Canada on how best to implement national pharmacare. If it does move ahead, and if there is a national formulary list, the NWT will have an option to maintain a regional supplementary formulary to address any of the specific needs that exist.

However, it is my understanding that, if we do have a secondary supplementary list, the costs associated with that secondary supplementary list would be the responsibility of the provincial or territorial government that has that list and not the federal government, because they will be moving forward with their list.

MR. O'REILLY: Thanks to the Minister for that. Obviously, we will want to make sure that many of our special needs are recognized and incorporated into the national list.

The national advisory council report also contained a recommendation on a way to deal with the supply of medications for rare conditions, which are often some of the most expensive prescriptions. Can the Minister explain how this element of the proposal should work in the Northwest Territories?

HON. GLEN ABERNETHY: It is kind of difficult to answer that question because we aren't actually sure what the federal government is going to do in this particular area. The question may, unfortunately, be a little premature, but what I can say is that we are watching this very closely. Regardless of which government makes up the federal government in the next term, I am hopeful and optimistic that they will continue to work on pharmacare, and we as a government should and must continue to make sure that our voice is heard during those discussions, but frankly I think it's a little early to speculate on what it might look like. It might be a hypothetical response, and I'm not prepared to do that at this point.

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

MR. O'REILLY: Merci, Monsieur le President. Thanks to the Minister for that, and I was careful with my question; I said how should it work in our jurisdiction, not how could it work or how will it work. That's okay.

In a related development, the federal government recently announced they are going to revise the rules and tools for the Patented Medicine Prices Review Board. In no way could that ever constitute a national pharmacare program, but the changes could result in the savings of billions of dollars on prescription medicine. Can the Minister tell us if his department knows about these developments with the Patented Medicine Prices Review Board and what we're doing to look at the impacts of these changes on our healthcare system? Mahsi, Mr. Speaker.

HON. GLEN ABERNETHY: Canadian patent medicine prices are among the highest in the world, here in Canada. In fact, I think we're the third highest, behind Switzerland and

the United States. That's not something I think Canadians should be super proud of. On August 9th, Health Canada did announce, as the Member said, amendments to the Patented Medicine Regulations. The Patented Medicine Prices Review Board is reviewing and examining the newly released amendments to the Patented Medicine Regulations and will identify any changes that may warrant an adjustment to its proposed guidelines framework and further considers.

Currently, it is difficult to speculate how the regulatory tools available to the Patented Medicine Prices Review Board may be changed; however, the NWT is supportive of reducing the cost of patented medicines for its residents and all Canadians, and we will continue to work at the Federal-Provincial-Territorial table to ensure that the voices of the Northwest Territories, the provinces, and Canadians are heard. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.