

Brand-name drug for blood pressure costly for province

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MANITOBA'S failure to quickly swap a pricey brand-name drug to treat high blood pressure with a generic version costs the province an extra \$17,000 every day, drug manufacturers allege.

Jim Keon, president of Canadian Generic Pharmaceutical Association, said Manitoba is one of two provinces that haven't approved the generic version of blood pressure medication Norvasc since it became available in July -- a decision he estimates costs Manitoba an extra \$17,000 a day. Newfoundland is the other province that hasn't replaced the brand-name drug with the generic drug.

Prescription tracking data from IMS Health shows the province spent nearly \$15 million on Norvasc prescriptions last year for about 175,000 Manitobans.

Keon said the province could save half of what it spends on the drug if it speeds up the slow process it uses to add new drugs to Pharmacare.

In July 2008, Manitoba told generic drug manufacturers they need to provide an analysis of the benefit of adding the product to Pharmacare and declare the price is equal to the drug in other provinces. The legal contracts are called "utilization management agreements," which the province says results in millions of dollars in savings.

But generic drug experts such as Keon said the process results in big delays that end up costing Manitoba taxpayers more money. According to the association's calculations, the delay has already cost Manitoba more than \$2 million in the last few months. "The problem is it is slowing everything down," Keon said. "Clearly, the delay in listing generic products costs them money."

Health Minister Theresa Oswald called the association's allegations a negotiation tactic and said the province is committed to getting the best price for generic drugs before they are added to Pharmacare. Oswald said the province will save more money by negotiating a cheaper price with generic drug manufacturers in the long run, rather than signing an agreement as soon as the drug hits the market.

"I believe we can do better, and yes we will make up the ground," she said. "Our job is to get the best price for Manitobans."

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