

Manitoba steps in to help diabetic Feds won't pay for needed medication

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A Manitoba First Nations man who is paying \$200 a month to buy a form of insulin not covered by Ottawa is free to apply for provincial pharmacare, Health Minister Theresa Oswald said Monday.

But Oswald said she wouldn't want to make a practice of paying for drugs that the federal government won't cover. Keeseekoowenin First Nation resident Marvin Blackbird started taking the long-lasting insulin Lantus last summer after he was repeatedly hospitalized for serious complications from Type 2 diabetes.

His blood-sugar levels were so out of control that his right leg was amputated, and he said his doctor told him his kidneys would shut down if he stopped taking the medication. He said he's had to borrow money from family members to pay for the drug.

Oswald said in an interview Monday that all Manitobans, regardless of where they live, have access to pharmacare. One of the eligibility criteria, however, is that coverage is available if prescriptions are not paid through other provincial or federal programs, she said.

"It's not a problem that we tend to encounter frequently," Oswald said, referring to the inconsistency in drug coverage between the two levels of government. But she views the case as "an emerging issue" that the province will address with Ottawa.

"We certainly wouldn't want conditions created whereby the feds never ever added anything else to their formulary because the province would just pick up the tab," Oswald said. "That's not really the spirit of a shared responsibility for the health of our citizens."

But she quickly added that the province was not making any accusations, and it believes in working co-operatively with Ottawa to address health coverage issues. "Nobody really benefits when people point fingers at one another," she said. In September 2008, Manitoba became the second province in the country to approve Lantus, which need only be injected once a day. Oswald credits the work of her department officials in being able to negotiate an affordable price with the manufacturer. It's believed that four provinces have now approved its use.

Ottawa has so far balked at Lantus's cost. In an email Monday, a federal Health Department spokesman said Ottawa's non-insured benefits program covers a range of insulin used to treat Type 2 diabetes, including NPH insulin.

"NPH insulin and Lantus are equally effective treatment options for Type 2 diabetes," the spokesman said. The difference is that NPH must be taken twice a day.

The federal spokesman said some provinces have been able to work out agreements with drug manufacturers to obtain drugs at a reduced cost. Ottawa is "actively exploring" changes that would allow its clients to benefit from similar arrangements, he said.