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Globe Editorial: Sunny Ways, but not for Pharmacare Reform

Sunny ways for Syrian refugees seeking a safe haven in Canada. Sunny ways for federal climate change research projects. Sunny ways for communities in Northern Canada who rely on Nutrition North programs. Cloudy ways for the 1 in 10 Canadians who have problems affording medications that they have been prescribed. Stormy ways for the 1 in 4 Canadians without drug insurance who cannot afford to have their prescriptions filled.

Canada is the only country which has universal healthcare without universal pharmacare. Canadians rely on patchwork of provincial and private drug programs to pay for medications which cost more than in any other country with universal healthcare. This system is devastating for those who cannot afford medications but do not meet the requirements of provincial programs. In 2015, 8% of Canadians did not fill a prescription or skipped a dose because of medication costs.

Aside from a brief sentence in an otherwise robust document on the Liberal Party website entitled *Priority Resolution: Funding for Health Care*, Trudeau has yet to shed any sunlight on a national pharmacare program. Maybe there is a limit to sunny ways, but it need not be pharmacare. There are some pragmatic steps which should be taken by the Trudeau government to ensure that no Canadian is unable to afford prescription medication.

Abandon the idea that a large comprehensive program is possible. Current gridlock between provincial and federal governments will prevent significant pharmacare negotiation from occurring as long as provinces refuse to cost-share. Like two eagles in freefall on a sunny day, neither will be the first to let go and accept more pharmacare costs.

Small changes are the answer. Reform the Canadian Patented Medicine Prices Review Board (PMPRB) to be more like its counterpart in the United Kingdom, the National Institute for Health And Clinical Excellence, or NICE: it even has a sunny ways sounding name! NICE operates independently of the National Health Service (NHS), separating healthcare provider from the drug coverage entity. The resulting structure allows the NHS to ensure equal access to cutting edge pharmaceuticals for British citizens, while still reserving the right to say no when the costs outweigh benefits.

NICE's main benefit to the taxpayer is its ability to effectively negotiate with large pharmaceutical companies. Currently the PMPRB only regulates the prices of patented medications, which makes about as much sense as if Health Canada regulated Heinz ketchup but not farmer's market ketchup. If the PMPRB takes on the role of regulating the price of non-patented drugs as well, then Canadians would be able to negotiate as a group with pharmaceutical companies, rather than on a province to province basis. Nova Scotians and Ontarians in arms demanding cheaper medications!

NICE also operates a fairly successful online database of drugs available to the NHS for doctors who are prescribing medications. Expanding the PMPRB's mandate to include a similar online directory would better inform doctors, who would in turn better inform patients of their drug options, increasing the level of care offered in Canada. Increasing access to medications creates more competition amongst generic drug providers, lowering drug costs.

Expanding upon already existing provincial drug coverage programs by standardizing the level of care which currently exists across all jurisdictions would ensure that these programs will not be cut by provinces later, hurting Canadians who desperately rely on medication coverage in exchange for cutting costs. Expanding these programs to include more patients, by

means of federal funding, would decrease the number of Canadians who fail to qualify for a provincial drug plan despite being unable to afford medications.

Unless Canada's patchwork of provincial drug coverage plans are enhanced by a pragmatic national pharmacare program, Canadians will continue to pay more for drugs than any other nation with universal healthcare and some Canadians will continue to forgo prescribed medications to cut personal costs. These small reforms are possible in the current political climate, all they need is a little sunshine.