Alberta College proposal to ban prescription-drug reward programs fosters public debate

“We need to focus on ethics and the new responsibilities of pharmacists”

— Greg Eberhart,
Registrar, Alberta
College of
Pharmacists

A proposal from the Alberta College of Pharmacists (ACP) to prohibit inducements for prescriptions and professional pharmacy services has generated a public debate in the province — with some retailers and loyalty-program providers saying such a ban would be unfair to consumers.

The issue of inducements has been on the ACP’s radar for several years, says registrar Greg Eberhart, but the College decided it was now time to move forward, given the evolution of pharmacists’ role in the health care system.

“With the advent of the new service model in July 2012, where pharmacists are no longer paid for dispensing, our Council decided to take a closer look at this,” he says.

The College is concerned that inducements for pharmacy goods and services, including rewards, loyalty-program points and coupons, may lead patients to make unhealthy choices — for example, waiting to fill a prescription until a time when they could earn extra points. When it surveyed pharmacists and pharmacy technicians, the ACP found 70% of respondents in favour of prohibiting inducements.

The regulator had invited feedback on its proposed ban from registrants and other stakeholders, and by mid-December of 2012 was evaluating the comments.

A number of stakeholders went public with their opposition to a ban, arguing that inducements provide consumers with a financial benefit that helps offset their medication expenses — something especially important for people on low incomes. Opponents expressing their concerns about a prohibition included Shoppers Drug Mart, Safeway, Air Miles Canada and patient advocacy groups, including the Chronic Pain Association of Canada.

According to Mr. Eberhart, the College’s decision would be guided by professional practice standards — and not by commercial arguments.

“We need to focus on ethics and the new responsibilities of pharmacists,” he says. “We need to consider what the environment looks like as we talk about such matters as patient-focused care, team-based care and objective decision-making.”

It was unfortunate that some stakeholders chose to engage the public in the issue, he adds. “I think the discussion has been highly slanted towards loyalty programs in the public arena. This is really a discussion about pharmacist practice and about pharmacists conducting themselves appropriately in establishing relationships with patients and with other health professionals.”

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PEI government signs new services agreement with PEI Pharmacists Association

The Government of Prince Edward Island and PEI pharmacists have signed a new Pharmacy Services Agreement that will allow the province to achieve savings in public drug plans, while setting the stage for expanded pharmacy services in the future.

Under the terms of the new agreement, a working group will be set up with a mandate to determine which additional professional services will be publicly funded, said Erin MacKenzie, the executive director of the Prince Edward Island Pharmacists Association (PEIPA), in an e-mail to *CPJ*.

The government has agreed to support expanded scope of practice for pharmacists and is expected to introduce enabling legislation next spring. The Prince Edward Island Pharmacy Board has proposed authority for a number of additional services, including immunizations and prescribing for minor ailments.

“Funding has been set aside for our reimbursement package in advance of any legislative change, as the new agreement is in effect until 2016,” said Ms. MacKenzie. “We needed a framework, so that we weren’t waiting until the next round of negotiations to start seeing any payment for services.” ▶