Increasing the safe and effective use of medications: The new federal priority

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ONE OF THE MOST UNDERREPORTED HEALTH-related stories of 2013 was the increased emphasis that the federal government has placed on the issue of prescription drug abuse and drug safety. Ottawa was clear in the Speech from the Throne in October 2013 that it would undertake a series of measures to increase patient safety and reduce medication-related errors, an important promise when one considers that up to 1 in 9 hospitalizations result from adverse drug reactions (ADRs). The government is thus far living up to that commitment. Over the past year, we have seen the introduction of a variety of measures designed to strengthen drug safety and reduce prescription drug abuse, notably the following:

- In June, the federal government announced its plain language labeling initiative, to ensure that drug labels and safety information are available in plain language so Canadians can better understand how and when to take their medications. As part of this initiative, Health Canada is providing \$3.2 million to the Institute for Safe Medication Practices Canada to study the reasons behind medication misuse.
- In December, the Minister of Health tabled in the House of Commons Bill C-17, the Protecting Canadians from Unsafe Drugs Act, otherwise known as “Vanessa’s Law” (named in honour of Vanessa Young, the daughter of Conservative Member of Parliament Terence Young, who died after taking a prescription drug that was later found to be unsafe and was withdrawn from the market). Among other things, this bill will provide the federal government with powers to recall medications proven to be unsafe, will require mandatory ADR reporting by hospitals (the definition of a reportable reaction will be decided as regulations are developed) and will compel drug companies to revise labels to clearly reflect health risk information, including updates for health warnings for children.

- Also in December, several Conservative Members of Parliament held consultations with stakeholders to develop a strategy on a national Take Back Your Medications day, which would be a national initiative aimed at encouraging Canadians to drop off any unused medications to designated locations, possibly including pharmacies. Although a federally run Take Back Your Medications day remains a longer-term objective, the Minister of Health has been open to the idea.
- Over the fall, the House of Commons Standing Committee on Health held hearings into the government’s role in addressing prescription drug abuse. The Committee has already heard from many witnesses, including CPhA, on how the government can continue to play a role in improving the safe and effective use of medications. A report from the Committee is expected in spring 2014, with possible additional actions after that.

The Canadian Pharmacists Association (CPhA) has been at the forefront in supporting and encouraging these initiatives. CPhA provided input into the development of these initiatives, expressed its qualified support for measures addressing drug safety and continues to meet with Health Canada officials to provide feedback into policy in this area. During its appearance before the Standing Committee on Health, CPhA argued for such measures as expanding scope of practice so that pharmacists could address safety issues head-on, enhancing training opportunities for pharmacists and ensuring that regulations prevent the entry of drugs with high risks of addiction to market.

There is no question that drug safety and appropriate use of medication are the top priority of pharmacists. Recent media stories have called into question the safety and efficacy of medications in Canada. By supporting these measures

and continuing to have a dialogue with the federal government on additional ways in which medication safety can be improved, CPhA, on

behalf of pharmacists across Canada, is making it clear that safety is priority number one for the profession. ■

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