The drug supply crisis: Is anybody listening?

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CPhA FIRST BEGAN RAISING THE ISSUE OF DRUG SHORTAGES IN Canada and the threat of US diversion of our medicines 15 years ago. Things have hardly improved over this time despite our efforts to persuade successive governments to do more to protect our fragile drug supply. In fact, worsening drug shortages are being compounded by drug quality issues and more frequent major recalls (e.g., valsartan, ranitidine). The United States is now fast-tracking efforts to import Canadian drugs into the American market. Canada is also closer than ever to making pharmacare a reality, which could put even more pressure on our country's drug supply.

Back in 2013, it looked as though progress on this issue could be imminent after CPhA cohosted an international summit on drug shortages with the International Pharmaceutical Federation (FIP), which saw participation from manufacturers and governments from around the world. Recommendations to come out of the summit included greater information sharing, procurement practices that award quality and continuity of supply, harmonized regulatory practices and improved mitigation strategies.

Findings from a recent CPhA survey, however, show that pharmacists are struggling more than ever to mitigate drug supply issues and their impact on patients. Results showed that 79% of pharmacists believe drug shortages have greatly increased over the past 3 to 5 years, 67% deal with drug shortages daily or multiple times a day and 72% are dissatisfied with how they are notified about shortages. The survey also found that shortages take up as much as 20% of a pharmacist's shift, and most pharmacists continue to face barriers that prevent them from using their expertise to provide drug substitutions when shortages occur.

Some progress has been made, though. After repeated calls from CPhA and other stakeholders, Health Canada finally implemented a publicly accessible mandatory drug shortage reporting website in 2017. Despite continued functionality issues and an overly broad definition of what constitutes a shortage, the website is critical to tracking shortages and analyzing trends and patterns. Health Canada has also reported that it is working with international partners to harmonize drug licensing regulations. But much less has been done to prevent and mitigate shortages. While Health Canada leads a Multi-Stakeholder Steering Committee on Drug Shortages, of which CPhA is a member, and has released guidelines on contracting and procurement strategies as

well as recommendations on drug manufacturing, it is unclear if these initiatives have resulted in any operational changes by drug purchasing bodies or manufacturers.

As we begin the year 2020 with close to 2000 drug shortages reported in the Drug Shortages Canada database, CPhA is urging the Canadian government to work towards implementing real policies to prevent and mitigate shortages, ensure the safety of the Canadian drug supply and protect it from diversion. We believe this will require significant international collaboration, global data collection, information sharing and the exploration of potential solutions, such as international standards for supply chain management or even global minimum prices for certain essential generic drugs. With experts, including pharmacists with considerable knowledge of drug supply issues and access barriers, and policy makers at the table, surely some ideas could take hold and advances could finally be made to ensure that patients across Canada and the world have access to a safe and stable source of medications. CPhA will continue to push the federal government to make this issue a priority and work with stakeholders to put forward possible solutions that would reduce shortages and support health providers when they do occur. ■

Call to Action

CPhA is urging the government to implement a comprehensive action plan to ensure that Canada has a stable drug supply. This plan should include:

- Research into the causes and solutions of drug supply issues
- Leadership on the international stage to enact tangible solutions to this problem
- Supports for frontline health care providers who are struggling to manage supply disruptions

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