

New Ontario drug plan to cover the uninsured

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TORONTO — Ontario will introduce a new province-wide prescription-drug plan to cover the "catastrophic" costs of medicine for uninsured people, Premier Bob Rae announced yesterday.

Details of the program, which will be in place by April 1, will not be announced for about six weeks.

"There is very compelling and very personal [evidence] that people are being dramatically affected personally by the cost of medication," Mr. Rae told reporters outside the legislature.

About 20 per cent of Ontario families have no insurance coverage for prescription drugs, he said. About 55 per cent of the population is covered through some form of employer or private insurance.

The new plan, approved by the Ontario cabinet at its weekly meeting yesterday, will help cover drug costs for 50,000 to 60,000 of the uninsured who have high enough drug bills, Health Minister Ruth Grier estimated.

While it will be expensive, the Premier said he did not approve the plan

until he was convinced that it could be paid for within current budget guidelines.

The announcement left officials in the Health Ministry and health-issues advocates scrambling for details.

Ontario now has two different prescription-drug plans. They will continue as is.

The first — the \$1.2-billion Ontario Drug Benefit Plan — pays 100 per cent of the costs of prescription drugs for the elderly and those on welfare. Eligible drugs are on an approved list called the "formulary."

The second plan, created in 1986, is a \$43-million "special drug program," under which the province pays the full cost of some extremely expensive drugs, such as those for victims of cystic fibrosis. It covers a small number of drugs and conditions, including four drugs for HIV-positive people.

The government will create a new, third, "catastrophic" drug plan. It will cover approved prescription drugs for the 20 per cent of uninsured Ontarians, and possibly insured people whose bills exceed the limits of their plan.