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Protesters demand help to pay for AIDS drugs

BY LESLIE PAPP
QUEEN'S PARK BUREAU

AIDS activists shouted slogans and piled pill-shaped signs outside an Ontario cabinet room yesterday, underlining demands for a new program to cover drug costs for terminally ill people.

Soaring medication expenses are forcing AIDS and HIV sufferers into hospitals or onto welfare, where the government picks up drug costs, activists said.

"We all live in fear of what will happen when we get prescription bills of \$1,000 and \$2,000 a month," said Maggie Atkinson of the 100-member Voices of Positive Women, a support group for women testing HIV-positive.

"Our doctors know we need certain drugs, but we can't afford to buy them," she told a news conference. "The government is failing us."

Activists were armed with a 47-page government-sponsored study indicating current drug benefit programs have been inadequate.

The study, finished last month, surveyed 500 Ontarians with AIDS or HIV — the virus believed to cause the disease — and found the drug needs of almost a third weren't being met very well, or at all.

"People who could be living productive lives find themselves having to go on welfare," said Tim McCaskell, co-chair of the 500-member AIDS Action Now lobby group.

Covering the drug costs of 15,000 Ontarians stricken with AIDS or HIV would cost \$40 million to \$50 million yearly, said AIDS Action Now co-chair Mark Freano.

Over the long run it would save money, he said, because it would keep people off welfare and allow them to live at home for a longer time instead of occupying expensive hospital space.

Cabinet ministers held out no hope of any quick change in drug programs.

Health Minister Ruth Grier expressed sympathy for HIV and AIDS sufferers, but said the government can't move right now.

"I don't want to give anybody any false hopes," she said after the protesters had departed.

"I don't have any money, the government doesn't have any money, and taxpayers don't want taxes raised."

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The Globe and Mail, Tuesday

Ontario cool to free drug idea

Can't afford it, Laughren indicates

BY CRAIG McINNES
Queen's Park Bureau

TORONTO — The provincial government yesterday got another taste of the kind of tough decisions it is going to have to make as it tries to pare another \$2-billion from the budget for the next fiscal year.

People with AIDS who came to Queen's Park yesterday demanding that the government make good on past promises to cover the high cost of their drugs got some sympathy but little else.

They want the government to implement a policy that could pay for drugs needed by people with fatal illnesses. Such a policy would cost about \$60-million, a spokesman for the groups said yesterday.

But as chanting demonstrators headed down the hall toward the room where the cabinet's policy and priorities committee was meeting, Finance Minister Floyd Laughren was telling reporters his first priority is dealing with the revenue shortfall.

"People want money for every conceivable thing there is out there. We're trying to gear down people's expectations because of the very, very difficult fiscal situation we're in," he said.

Reminded of past promises, the Finance Minister said "there were a lot of things we thought we could do when we formed the government, but given the problems we're now facing, we simply won't be able to deliver on" them.

At a news conference a few minutes earlier, reporters were told that drugs to treat acquired immune deficiency syndrome can cost as much as \$2,000 a month. Some people have been forced to go on welfare to get their drugs paid for, while others simply do without.

"This is not the way the provincial health plan is supposed to work in Ontario," said Maggie Atkinson of a group called the Voices of Positive Women.

Ms. Atkinson said she pays about \$400 a month for herbal remedies she uses. "If I was taking acyclovir, which is one of the drugs I could be taking, the prescription would cost about \$1,000 a month."

She called Mr. Laughren's reaction shortsighted and unrealistic.

"We think that there will be savings to the health-care system if people are treated early because many opportunistic infections can be prevented and because many people — because they can't afford the drugs — are becoming ill and going into hospital.

"I don't think that we should lower our expectations in Ontario for health care. Health care is a right."

Health Minister Ruth Grier came out of the meeting to tell reporters she was in no position to promise anything to anyone.

As for the argument that money spent now could save money later, she said that could be said of a lot of things. The problem is that there is no money to spend now. "I don't have any money, the government doesn't have any money and the taxpayers don't want taxes raised."

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Activists march on cabinet

By ANITA ELASH
Queen's Park Bureau

AIDS activists marched on a cabinet meeting yesterday to try to convince the NDP government to fulfill its promise to pay for more AIDS drugs.

But Finance Minister Floyd Laughren offered little hope, saying there's no more money to live up to government pledges.

"We're trying to gear down people's expectations because of the very, very difficult fiscal situation we're in," he told reporters.

The province now spends about \$8 million a year on four drugs thought to delay the onset of AIDS.

Patients without private insurance often go on welfare to get the drugs, said Maggie Atkinson, of the group Voices of Positive Women.

Mark Freano, co-chairman of AIDS Action Now, led about a dozen protesters who marched on a cabinet meeting. They were blocked by six police officers.