

OPINION

Whatever the motive, NDP improves drug coverage

ALITTLE less than two weeks ago, in Hamilton, two AIDS activists named Greg Pavelich and Brent Southin sat down to meet with Premier Bob Rae.

The backdrop was the New Democratic Party's biennial convention. Although tightly controlled, it had been punctuated by angry protests against the Rae government's policy reversals — by public auto insurance supporters, injured workers and the AIDS activists themselves.

Rae knew this. He also knew that in order to have a chance in the coming election, he needs to show traditional NDP voters he still cares.

As Glen Brown, a spokesperson for AIDS Action Now recounted the story later, Southin and Pavelich were blunt. The government, they told Rae, had been stalling for months on its promise to introduce comprehensive drug reform that could help those with HIV and AIDS. AIDS groups were planning a massive demonstration for today — World AIDS Day.

Unless the government announced a

Action deadline, Rae stepped out of a meeting of the full cabinet to make the announcement. There would be a new comprehensive drug plan. It would be available to all Ontarians not covered by any other kind of insurance.

Speaking to reporters, he was vague. Details of what he called the "safety net program" would be worked out later, he said.

But sources close to the government say most of the parameters of the scheme already are known.

It is expected to cost between \$60 million and \$80 million annually. It will cover all Ontarians who purchase prescription drugs and who do not have — or who have run out of — any other kind of insurance.

There will be a deductible. Ontarians will have to pay their own drug costs up to a certain limit. Only after that limit is reached will the new government program kick in.

The cabinet has not yet decided what this deductible will be. Under one version, a family would have to spend 4.5 per cent of its income on drugs before being eligible for aid.

For a family making \$35,000 a year, this would amount to a \$1,575 deductible.

A second version of the plan would involve a sliding scale. As family income rose, a person would be expected to pay a higher percentage of that income as a deductible before the safety net scheme kicked in.

In either case, the threshold would be high. In practical terms, only those with the most serious diseases requiring expensive drug therapy would benefit. As Rae said yesterday, "it won't be perfect."

Rae said the government will continue with an existing \$45 million program that pays 100 per cent of drug costs for people suffering from certain illnesses — such as serious kidney disease, cystic fibrosis, organ transplants and AIDS (for four specific drugs only).

As well, he said, seniors and those on welfare will continue to have 100 per cent of their drug costs covered by the province's \$1.2 billion Ontario Drug Benefit Program.

Previous NDP attempts at drug re-

form had foundered when the cabinet split over whether to end whatever element of universal coverage exists in the drug benefit program by charging user fees to seniors.

Rae didn't talk about International Aids Day yesterday. He said he was making his announcement then because the government had suddenly found it has more money.

Perhaps. Whatever the motive, yesterday's announcement is good news. The New Democratic government finally has managed to move toward a more universal system of drug coverage without sacrificing those elements of universality — particularly among seniors — that already exist.

That's heartening. The trend in Canada has been to cut back rather than expand universal, public health care. Up to now, the Rae government itself has been victim to this mindset.

This time it is moving in the right direction.

Thomas Walkom's column normally appears Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday.

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reform plan in the interim, the Premier would be burned in effigy.

Health Minister Ruth Grier was called in. A drug reform plan had been languishing in her ministry for 18 months. She wanted action. Rae was sympathetic. But others in cabinet were wary — until they were presented with the AIDS ultimatum.

Last week, Rae ordered the drug plan to be given top priority. This Monday, it was approved by the inner cabinet.

Yesterday, one day before the AIDS