



Legislating Fair Prices on Assistive Medical Devices

Club Name: Windsor CFUW		
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Title of Resolution The prices of assistive medical devices, which enhance the quality of life of all citizens and permanent residents in Ontario require legislative regulation.		
RESOLVED, that CFUW Ontario Council urges the Government of Ontario to confirm the definition of health care includes assistive devices, as set out in Ministry of Health Regulation 134/98, as an integral part of health care. RESOLVED, that CFUW Ontario Council urges the Government of Ontario to establish an Assistive Devices Review Board to regulate the costs of these assistive devices.		
Background: Why is it important for OC to have a Resolution on this topic at this time? According to the World Health Organization: Access to good quality, affordable, and appropriate health products is indispensable to advance universal health coverage, address health emergencies, and promote healthier populations.¹ This need for appropriate health products is becoming more important as the overall population is aging and experiencing longer life expectancies. ² Often adverse health outcomes which accompany aging, like poor hearing, poor vision, and limited mobility have other consequences. For example, world-wide dementia cases are		

expected to double every 20 years and we are beginning to recognize that hearing loss contributes to dementia.³

The Government of Ontario has also recognized the importance of assistive devices and provided some financial support for many years. Their definition of assisted devices includes aids used to replace, compensate for, or improve the functional abilities of people with disabilities. Under current regulations assistive devices include a broad range of items such as mobility and visual/hearing aids, orthotics/prosthetics, speech devices, medical supplies, environmental controls, and respiratory devices. Specifically they are:

- medical – diabetic supplies, enteral feeding equipment and supplies, ostomy supplies, ventilators, respiratory equipment and supplies
- mobility – prosthetics, orthotics, and pressure modification devices, wheelchairs, positioning and ambulation aids
- sensory – communication aids, visual aids (includes optical aids, reading and writing devices and orientation aids such as laser canes) and hearing aids.⁴

However, the costs of these devices vary enormously, without obvious justifications. It is not apparent why with advancing technology, the costs for different devices should result in this cost variance. By way of example according to some sources the average cost of hearing aids in Canada is around \$1,000 to \$4,000.⁵ The Ontario government hearing aid coverage is \$1,000 but some of our own members have paid as much as \$6,000. Unfortunately, it is not possible to get a reliable assessment of the costs of many of the devices. Notwithstanding the actual cost the government aims to only cover 75% of the costs of devices. As a result, there is often a significant personal cost associated with most of these devices. Of course, private post-retirement benefits may off-set these costs, but the reality is that less than 20% of working Canadians have those benefits.^{6,7}

Similarly, many European countries only provide marginal financial support for devices like hearing aids. To address the issue WHO has recommended countries:

Develop and adopt national Action Plan and strategy on hearing loss and deafness, based on HEARING interventions as outlined in the WHO World Report on Hearing focusing on equality, prevention, and rehabilitation to enable hard of hearing people equal opportunities.

Ensure hard of hearing patients have access to hearing care and rehabilitation services to allow them to continue full and independent lives.

The strategy should include universal reimbursement/ provision of hearing aids and rehabilitation which does not put undue burden of hard of hearing citizens.⁸

Another possible solution to address this inequity was developed in the US, where health care is a private for-profit entity. According to a White House Fact Sheet:

.... under a final rule issued by the FDA, adults with mild-to-moderate hearing loss can buy hearing aids at a store or online without a prescription, exam, or audiologist fitting. FDA estimates this could lower average costs by as much as \$3,000 per pair—providing significant breathing room for the nearly 30 million Americans with hearing loss, including nearly 10 million adults under age 60.

Retailers across the country are now selling over-the-counter hearing aids. Options available today or coming soon include:

Starting today, Walgreens is selling hearing aids at stores nationwide and online for \$799 per pair. According to Walgreens, comparable models sold by specialists range from \$2,000 to \$8,000 a pair.⁹

The Canada government addressed a similar problem to remedy another health care issue – the elevated and high costs of prescription drugs. A federal regulatory process for drugs has been the responsibility of the Patented Medicine Prices Review Board (PMPRB). The PMPRB regulates the prices of patented medicines sold in Canada, and reports on pharmaceutical trends. Statistics indicate the ratio of prices in the United States to Canada was 3.32, which indicates that the prices of patented drugs in the United States were more than three times higher than in Canada.¹⁰

Based on this background we have concluded that there is a need for some form of regulation to ensure the costs of an important, integral part of contemporary health care are arrived at equitably. We acknowledge that patients should have the choice to upgrade an appliance which meets their needs and preferences at their costs. However, it is not apparent that patients have enough knowledge to be able to evaluate the benefits of the different types of similar appliances. Much like the different costs associated with generic drugs and brand name drugs, decisions about purchases should be based on accurate and accessible information.

Accordingly, CFUW Ontario Council urges the government to expand the definition of health care to include assistive devices. The price of assistive devices should be regulated by the Province of Ontario as a health care necessity. This regulatory function could be appropriately conducted by a newly established Assistive Devices Review Board under the authority of the province. The Review Board would accept evidence from suppliers, medical practitioners, and consumer groups to establish pricing for assistive devices. Board adjudicators would be experts representing the medical community, consumers, and suppliers. The Board would establish a pricing schedule for devices which could provide a reasonable standard to eliminate or reduce the adverse health conditions. This would provide a means to regulate the health care marketplace to insure universal access.

Implementation:

The goal of this resolution is to make medically necessary devices available at a reasonable cost to the residents of Ontario. To accomplish this goal, we will make a presentation to public interest groups like CARP and the Canadian Hearing Society to introduce the resolution. They will be asked to support the resolution and circulate a survey to their membership.

Concurrently we will ask all CFUW clubs in Ontario to introduce the concept to their local MPPs.

Once the resolution has received some attention, a submission will be prepared and forwarded to all provincial political parties, including the Minister of Health and opposition Health Critics.

Bibliography:

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