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Catastrophic drug plan urged; ? Province will soon be alone in not having plan

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FREDERICTON - An organization fighting on behalf of patients with a rare blood disease is calling on David Alward's government to speed up the rollout of its catastrophic drug plan.

The Canadian Association of PNH Patients points out that Prince Edward Island's catastrophic drug plan will be ready for October - leaving New Brunswick as the last place in the country without a program to help people avoid being financially ruined by high drug costs.

"We are very concerned that the minister of health continues to delay implementation of legislation that would save the lives of patients," said the organization in a press release yesterday.

It wants Health Minister Ted Flemming and other officials to acknowledge what it calls the urgent need for the government to immediately introduce its catastrophic drug program.

The Tories had promised during the 2010 election campaign to introduce a program within one year of winning power that would cover costly prescription drugs for people who could not afford them. Almost three years later, the Progressive Conservative government says it wants to hold public consultations before acting on the recommendations of a special committee that said the government should

create a universal plan through payroll deductions.

The Canadian Association of PNH Patients has highlighted the case of Saint John radio host Mark Brennan, who has an ultra-rare and life-threatening blood disease called paroxysmal nocturnal hemoglobinuria, or PNH. Brennan remains the only PNH patient in Canada who is still waiting for funding for a costly drug, called Soliris, that will keep him alive and healthy, according to the association.

Tracey Burkhardt, a spokeswoman for the Department of Health, said the drug would eventually be covered by the province.

"The Department of Health is in the process of developing a drug plan for uninsured New Brunswickers, which the government has committed to implementing before the end of its mandate," she said in an email. "The plan will be jointly funded by government, employers and the public."

Burkhardt said the new program would include a requirement that every drug plan in the province be at least as good as the New Brunswick Prescription Drug Program. Soliris is already listed as a drug covered by that program.

The organization's president, Barry Katsof, will be in Fredericton on Tuesday to talk to

media about the government's position immediately following question period at the legislature. The Opposition Liberals have been highly critical of the Tories' approach on the file and they are likely going to bring up the subject again.

The association says Katsof's visit to the legislature was prompted by neighbouring Prince Edward Island's recent announcement that its program will be up and running as of Oct. 1, whereas Minister Flemming's lengthy stakeholder consultation process will stall the New Brunswick catastrophic drug program launch until the summer of 2014, not far off from the next scheduled provincial election.

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