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Minister promises drug plan; ? Ted Flemming says catastrophic drug program will be set up sooner than expected

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FREDERICTON - The province's health minister says a catastrophic drug plan will be rolled out sooner than expected - part of it perhaps as early as this fall - and is staking his fledgling political career on delivering the goods.

Ted Flemming was under intense pressure yesterday to fulfil the Tories' pledge from the 2010 election to quickly come up with a plan that would provide adequate prescription drug coverage for every New Brunswicker.

Besides being pilloried by the Liberal Opposition in question period, Flemming met with the president of an association for people with a rare blood disease, who urged him to speed up the introduction of a comprehensive program.

"It may involve a changing of the schedule, but I'll tell you it involves legislation, the private sector, employers, administration, the running of it and the proper paying of it," Flemming told reporters. "And we're going to do it."

Under scrutiny in question period, Flemming put his political reputation on the line.

"The expensive drugs will be covered. We will do it. I will set my career on it."

Afterwards, Flemming met briefly with

Barry Katsof of Montreal, the president of the Canadian Association of PNH Patients, who's been lobbying the Tory government to provide coverage for the drug Solaris. People who suffer from PNH or paroxysmal nocturnal hemoglobinuria risk death unless they get the special drug treatment, which costs up to \$500,000 a year for a single patient.

Both men described the meeting as constructive and thoughtful. Since winning a byelection and becoming health minister last year, Flemming has only said the catastrophic drug plan would be introduced by the end of the Tories' mandate in September 2014.

After meeting with Katsof, the minister said it was possible part of it would be rolled out this fall or next spring.

Katsof, who said he wouldn't be alive if it weren't for the Quebec government's prescription drug plan that covers Solaris, was pleased.

"We had very good dialogue and hopefully the government will implement the program sooner than later, and it won't wait till the fall of 2014," he said. "We're optimistic and we're very grateful they're listening."

Justin Manuel and his dad Gordon Manuel of Riverview were also buoyed by the

news. Justin, 21, a third-year student at Mount Allison University, said his family could never afford his Solaris medication if it weren't for his father's workplace drug plan. It only provides coverage if he remains a full-time student. Once he graduates, he's on his own.

"I'm glad the minister is committed to getting the drug program out so I can get peace of mind sooner. That's all I really wanted, for the plan to come out as fast as possible."

His father added: "We believe the minister and we look forward to seeing a plan within the next year. That's what we've been working toward."

With Prince Edward Island set to introduce a new drug plan by Oct. 1, New Brunswick will remain the only province in the country without a catastrophic drug plan. New Brunswick's Tories had promised to create such a program within one year of taking office in 2010.

Flemming says the 32-month delay has nothing to do with the province's troubled finances but the kind of plan the government wants to roll out. Seventy per cent of New Brunswickers already have some kind of drug coverage, either through the government if they are on welfare or a senior citizen, or through private workplace plans. Thirty per cent of the population - mostly the working poor - have no coverage.

The Tories are devising a universal plan that will ask employers and employees to contribute two-thirds of the costs through payroll taxes. It is consulting with businesses to figure out how it should be done, which Flemming says takes time.

Liberal health critic Donald Arseneault said that was a poor excuse.

"The promise was made three years ago. Today, three years later, it is still only a promise. I tell you, the members of the Alward government will have to have two catastrophic plans next year: one for the patient who actually needs it and one for their re-election."

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