

OHIP cost cutting complicates cancer treatment

(Another mark against National Health Care)

BY SONJA PUZIC, THE WINDSOR STAR JUNE 17, 2009

At 30, Mark Hunt should be in the prime of his life.

He loves his job as a kinesiologist at a local physiotherapy clinic and spending time with his young family -- wife Meghan and 11-month-old daughter Katelyn. He has always been active, enjoying regular workouts and even running the Detroit marathon last year.

On the outside, Hunt looks like a 30-year-old should. But a tumour the size of his heart has invaded his chest and others have found their way to his bowel.

Hunt has stage IV melanoma, a serious form of skin cancer that has spread to other parts of his body. Once it reaches stage IV, melanoma is very difficult to treat and Hunt seems to have only one option left.

Interleukin-2 is a protein in the human body that stimulates the immune system and helps infection-fighting cells multiply and grow. It is used to treat certain types of cancers such as advanced melanoma and renal cancer. IL-2 was approved by Health Canada several years ago, but its use is not as widespread in Canada as it is in the United States.

OHIP covers pre-approved IL-2 treatments in the U.S. for Ontario residents who need it, but Hunt has been waiting to get the life-saving drug for two months.

He was first diagnosed with melanoma in 2005, when a large, strange-looking mole appeared on his chest. The mole was removed and Hunt underwent chemotherapy.

Over the years, regular checkups at the Windsor cancer clinic didn't find anything out of the ordinary, but in April, a routine X-ray ordered by the family doctor revealed a tumour in Hunt's chest. Another tumour had attached itself to a lymph node and more were discovered in Hunt's bowel.

Hunt and his wife were floored. How could cancer spread so aggressively in the body of a seemingly healthy, young, fit man? And why didn't anyone catch the melanoma recurrence before it reached the final stage, leaving Hunt with precious little time to fight back?

"I just had a cough that wouldn't go away," Hunt said. "I was shocked when they said it was cancer."

Hunt had bowel surgery in Windsor but not all the tumours could be removed from his intestines. He sought treatment in Detroit and had a consultation with an oncologist there but didn't get OHIP's approval to proceed because of a simple mistake in the paperwork, Meghan said.

Frustrated, the couple spent hours on the phone, calling doctors, the Ministry of Health and local politicians, hoping that someone could help them.

But while they were scrambling to secure Hunt's treatment in Detroit, there was a change in OHIP rules.

OHIP will now only cover Hunt's cancer treatment in Buffalo, N.Y., where the Roswell Park Cancer Institute is the ministry's only "preferred provider" of IL-2 treatment for metastatic malignant melanoma and renal cell carcinoma. The Ministry of Health has a number of funding agreements with out-of-country health care facilities, which are chosen based on specific criteria.

After much bureaucratic wrangling, Hunt will finally meet with specialists in Buffalo today and find out when he can begin treatment there. But he still doesn't understand why he and his family have to make the four-hour trip instead of simply crossing the border to get the same medical care in Detroit.

Ministry spokesman Andrew Morrison said the Roswell Park Cancer Institute was selected as a preferred IL-2 treatment provider in May because it seems to be favoured by Ontario's doctors and oncologists at a lower cost to the government.

Between April 2007 and April of this year, 55 Ontario patients have been referred to Roswell Park for IL-2 treatments, compared to four patients sent to the Harper University Hospital and the Karmanos Cancer Center in Detroit, Morrison said.

The average cost of sending a patient to Roswell Park was \$113,000, compared to \$125,000 at the Harper hospital and \$148,000 at the Karmanos facility, he added.

To ensure that the process is fair and competitive, the ministry will review the status of Roswell Park next April, Morrison said.

Hunt hasn't been able to work since the bowel surgery and Meghan has had to postpone going back to work after maternity leave. The family has been relying on the generosity of their family, friends and co-workers, who have been helping them out financially and bringing clothes and supplies for little Katelyn.

Hunt's boss and co-workers at the Smith Physiotherapy Clinic on Lauzon Road have joined in the effort, organizing fundraising activities in July. Chuck Smith, owner of the clinic, has even volunteered to be tossed in a dunk tank for a good cause.

"Mark has dedicated his career to helping people," Smith said, "and now he needs our help."

FUNDRAISER

The Smith Physiotherapy Clinic at 832 Lauzon Rd. will be holding a fundraiser barbecue for Mark Hunt and his family in the evening hours of Friday, July 17. The next day, Saturday, July 18, there will be a scavenger hunt there at 11 a.m. and on Sunday, staff will host an 11 a.m. road hockey tournament in front of the clinic

Our Note; When the U.S. has National Health Care, the top notch Cancer treatment centers will all go away as they have in Canada and other National Health Care countries. So, where will Americans find the best treatment for Cancer in 10 years when the system has transitioned to National Health Care?

Answer; There won't be any.