



Ontario waits to make decision on new MS treatment



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Ontario will not follow Saskatchewan's lead and pay for the clinical trials of a promising new multiple sclerosis therapy but the Liberals have yet to shut the door on future funding.

Saskatchewan is now the first province to fund tests into liberation treatment, an experimental procedure that opens up veins carrying blood from the brain to the heart of MS patients. Italy's Dr. Paolo Zamboni pioneered the therapy, which some hail as a medical breakthrough.

"It is just early days yet," Premier Dalton McGuinty told reporters Wednesday at Queen's Park. "It is very interesting, I think it holds some promise and our responsibility now is to work together and make sure it is something we should be supporting."

There are nearly 75,000 Canadians living with the disabling disease that attacks the myelin, a sheath surrounding the nerves in the central nervous system. The disease is progressive, striking mostly young people between the ages of 15 to 40. For some reason, Saskatchewan has a high number of cases.

The premier said he personally knows how difficult MS can be on a family. An uncle of McGuinty's wife, Terri, had MS and was in a wheelchair when he was in his 30s.

"There are many families around the province touched by MS and it can be very challenging, coping with that," he said. "I know when families hear about something like this, a potential treatment with good indications of success they are going to be very eager to embrace this."

However, opposition critics said the government should not put the brakes on this treatment; instead it should be funded.

"This government is taking a very laissez-faire approach to this," said Progressive Conservative MPP Christine Elliott (Whitby-Oshawa). "They should be proactive in dealing with a situation that holds a lot of promise."

MS is a degenerative disease and patients can't "sit around and wait for years" for the research to be completed. The government should step in and help fund research, she said.

Clinical trials should be opened up in Ontario right away, said NDP MPP Rosario Marchese (Trinity-Spadina). "People are desperate," he said. Governments are worried about the expense, he added. "But I worry about people and how families get destroyed as they wait for some miracle."

Hamilton's McMaster University and St. Joseph's Healthcare are beginning a sophisticated ultrasound and imaging trial under Dr. Ian Rodger to test Zamboni's theories.

The study will look at the affected veins to see if they are comprised as Zamboni suggests. The Hamilton study will involve 200 participants. "We are looking to see if there is an increased prevalence of these blocked veins," Rodger said. "We are going to scrutinize this to see if there is validity to his hypothesis or not."

Rodger said McGuinty's move is prudent and understandable. "There is always a concern when there is something revolutionary, that seems too good to be true, there is always a natural skepticism," he said in an interview.

The biggest dilemma here is that there is evidence from some people that they've been dramatically improved but there are others that have not had good results, he added.

"It is not a panacea for all," said Rodger, vice-president of research at St. Joseph's Healthcare.

This treatment brings hope to those with MS, agreed Health Minister Deb Matthews. "We are watching very, very closely all the advances made in terms of research," she said. "I think we owe it to the people with MS to look closely at this."

But at this point there is no solid medical evidence to support this, she said. "Saskatchewan is actually funding research to determine whether or not there is evidence."