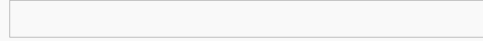

Hepatitis C patient fights for medication

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Infected in tainted blood transfusion 30 years ago

Sarah Ladik

INUVIK

Rudy Cardinal has been sick for a long time.

A victim of the tainted blood scandal in 1983 which infected 32,000 Canadians, Cardinal contracted Hepatitis C, a viral infection that affects the liver, from a blood transfusion at the Inuvik hospital.

"They gave me four units of blood," Cardinal told the Drum.

"To this day, I remember that cold feeling I got. A year after, I starting quitting all my sports. I kept getting hurt, noticed I was sick all the time."

It took 13 years for him to be diagnosed, after which came a long period of fighting for recognition that the tainted blood had been responsible for the Hep C, as well as compensation.

He was given a drug that had a 50-50 chance of halting the infection but not curing it, which it did. It involved a needle once a week and 12 pills a day for 11 months.

Now, however, he has hyperthyroidism, gallstones and lives on a regimen of pills and medication every day.

He can't say whether his other illnesses are a direct result of the Hep C, but says he hasn't felt well for a single day in 32 years.

Now, there is a drug that is 85 per cent curative and involves pills to be taken over 90 days, called Harvoni. It costs \$150,000 for the course of treatment and the GNWT isn't covering it because Cardinal's liver isn't failing.

"Come on guys," Cardinal said.

"You got me sick 32 years ago. You have to make it right."

Cardinal said when he found out about Harvoni earlier this year, he went to see a specialist in Edmonton, who told him that he would live with his condition.

"He told me my liver was in good shape but I've been sick for 32 years," he said.

In response, Cardinal said he called the Inuvik Regional Hospital and, with the people he had been dealing with for nearly two decades crowded around the phone, he convinced the specialist to prescribe the new medication.

When the doctor relented, the nurses and staff on the phone began clapping.

"It was like a miracle," Cardinal said.

"I was headed home and I couldn't stop smiling. It was going to be a miracle. I was going to be cured."

He said that when he got back to Inuvik in April, he went straight to the hospital, where a staff member whom he trusted told him he was covered and that she would fax the order over to the pharmacy right away.

He waited for two weeks and, while at the hospital getting a prescription for other medication, asked about the Harvoni.

The doctor he was seeing asked him where it said that he would be covered for such medication.

"It's been nearly six months, and I've heard nothing," he said.

"I'm almost wondering if it's feasible to hire a criminal lawyer. Everything I've got, I had to fight for myself."

The Drum contacted the Department of Health and Social Services, but a spokesperson did not respond to a request for comment before press time.

"The drug would give me more freedom in life," Cardinal said.

"To not be afraid of going to sleep and not waking up. I'm not giving up either. You got to keep fighting, moving on."