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Oral Question 428-19(2): Medical Travel

This letter is in follow up to the Oral Questions you raised on October 29, 2020 regarding Medical Travel.

I would first like to provide some context for the provision of medical travel in the Northwest Territories (NWT). The Government of the Northwest Territories (GNWT) Medical Travel Policy falls under the authority of the Executive Council. It provides the framework for the Minister of Health and Social Services (HSS) to develop or amend supporting ministerial policies and program provisions. The Medical Travel Policy (Policy) was last updated in April 2015, and changes to the ministerial policies came into effect in June 2019.

The Medical Travel – Escort Criteria ministerial policy describes reasons for approving non-medical escorts and their anticipated duties. The escort criteria were designed to address the unique needs of each patient, rather than setting more arbitrary guidelines (such as age) to qualify for escort benefits. The referring Health Care Provider is best equipped to assess a patient's need for a non-medical escort, and should be able to describe why the patient may not be able to travel unassisted. Unless the patient is a minor, age is not a factor when determining the need for an escort.

The Medical Travel Office is situated within the Northwest Territories Health and Social Services Authority (NTHSSA), and is primarily responsible for approving transportation benefits and coordinating travel for residents eligible for coverage under the GNWT's Policy. The Medical Travel Office (MTO) does not coordinate travel for individuals who receive coverage through employer benefit plans such as employees (and their dependents) of the GNWT, the Hay River Health and Social Services Authority, the federal government (including RCMP and the Department of National Defense), Yellowknife's education districts, private companies with benefit plans, or travel related to WSCC claims.

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I am aware of concerns that the MTO does not always approve non-medical escort benefits despite recommendations from a patient's doctor or nurse. The recommendation from the doctor or nurse does not always align with the Policy criteria. The MTO is responsible for reviewing and approving requests to ensure the Policy is being applied equitably. Medical travel staff will often contact the referring clinicians to get additional information if there is insufficient justification provided with the request for an escort.

It is important to note that the provision of non-medical escorts is to support patients with travelling to another community to access services. However, I recognize that there are a number of ways in which patients, families and service providers feel there would be a benefit to improving or expanding current supports to patients when leaving home for medical care to improve the outcomes for patients, including assistance beyond just the travel.

I have asked officials to provide me with an initial internal review of the types of requests for escorts that have been received that fall outside the policy and the potential cost implications. This information will be important to support future discussions, with yourself and other stakeholders, on the consideration of potential changes to the current types of supports provided to patients (ie. that would be paid by the GNWT) that may help to improve overall patient experiences when receiving health services away from home. I expect this initial review will be completed by March 2021.

If a patient is eligible for coverage under the GNWT Medical Travel Policy, but has not been approved for supports for a specific medical travel referral, the patient can submit an Exception Request (the Form is available on the NTHSSA website under Medical Travel). The Policy sets out the criteria and process by which consideration will be given to exceptional circumstances that are not captured in the Medical Travel Ministerial Policies.

If a patient believes that the Policy is not being applied as intended there is an appeals process available, outlined in the Appeals ministerial policy, through which a patient can request a review from the Department of HSS which can overturn a decision made by the MTO. The patient can contact the Medical Travel Office (MTO) to get a copy of the Appeal Request form to submit, and the MTO can assist if needed. The appeal form is also publicly available on the HSS portion of the GNWT website. I realize there may not be sufficient lead time to address imminent issues through the appeals process, and so as an alternative, I recommend contacting the Department of HSS System Navigator (hss_navigator@gov.nt.ca or 1-855-846-9601) to address issues in short order.

As you pointed out in your Member's Statement, traveling to an unfamiliar setting can be challenging and stressful for people of all ages, and requires careful preparation and planning. While some patients will still need the additional individual support of a non-medical escort, boarding homes are contracted in our main referral hubs as a specialized support system to make travel easier for eligible patients. Boarding Homes pick up patients at the airport, drive them to their appointments or to a pharmacy, provide food and accommodations and assist patients with luggage or with their mobility.

Boarding homes do not provide medical services, nor do non-medical escorts. When medical care is required outside a hospital following a procedure, such as dressing changes, part of the discharge planning process involves ensuring the patient has the necessary medical support, usually coordinated through home care services or follow-up outpatient appointments.

The NTHSSA's Boarding Home contracts have provisions that require the contractors to meet all requests for service. When a boarding home has reached capacity at its facility, they are required to place clients in hotels and continue to provide food and transportation services. At the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the boarding homes have had reduced capacity within their facilities due to physical distancing requirements, which has led to an increase in the use of hotels. As a provision of the boarding home contracts, patients who have had anesthesia are given priority placement at the boarding home to satisfy the expectation of support 24 hours after sedation.

Boarding homes are required under contract to provide a minimum of three nutritious meals per day, plus snacks, including provision of special diets as prescribed. Concerns about the quality of food provided by a boarding home can be brought to the attention of the boarding home management staff to resolve immediate dietary issues, or submitted to the Territorial Manager of Patient Movement. Feedback from boarding home guests is essential for addressing any systemic or persistent issues. Since the provision of food is integrated into the daily contracted boarding home rate (daily/nightly rate per person), providing patients and their approved escorts with additional per diems when placed at hotels would essentially be a double payment. We believe addressing quality concerns through contract management is a more effective and efficient solution.

As an avenue for ongoing quality improvement of the medical travel program, a working group comprised of HSS and NTHSSA officials has been established to monitor trends in the administration of medical travel. The working group is developing a workplan to undertake analysis in 2021/22 to review the range of issues and questions that have been identified, to ensure continuous improvement and sustainability of the supports provided by Government to residents when accessing medical services away from home.

Any feedback that is received from the public related to the Medical Travel program and policy is brought before the working group to inform the ongoing continuous improvement discussions. The public can provide feedback

- to the NTHSSA by contacting the regional Quality Risk Manager in their region (the phone numbers are on the NTHSSA website) or by emailing nthssafeedback@gov.nt.ca or;
- to the Department by completing the online form under "Contact Us" on the www.hss.gov.nt.ca website.

Thank you.



Julie Green
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c Clerk of the Legislative Assembly

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