

# Access to abortion drugs limited to regional centres

*Health authority monitoring prescriptions to weigh expansion*

by **Avery Zingel**  
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There is no plan to extend access to the Mifegymiso abortion pill beyond larger communities, say territorial officials.

Nine women have been prescribed Mifegymiso, commonly known as the abortion pill, in the NWT since it became available last year, stated Northwest Territories Health and Social Services Authority (NTHSSA) spokesperson David Maguire.

The figures do not include Hay River, he added.

The pill is offered in Yellowknife, Inuvik, Fort Smith and Hay River through the Northern Options for Women (NOW) program.

The NTHSSA is monitoring use of the pill in the NWT "to determine whether expansion of use would be both safe and appropriate," stated Maguire.

To obtain a prescription, an ultrasound is required to ensure the fetus is under 63 days old, and there are financial limitations to offering the service, including the cost of installing ultrasound equipment – between \$20,000 and \$50,000 – and staff training and hiring, stated Maguire.

The health authority isn't aware of any requests from community

groups, organizations or individuals seeking wider access to the drug, and those wanting the pill can go through the NOW program, which offers medical travel to the nearest location where it can be prescribed, according to Maguire. Mifegymiso consists of two different drugs. First, Mifepristone blocks the hormone progesterone, which is required to continue a pregnancy while another drug called misoprostol induces contractions to trigger the shedding of the uterine lining.

In a July 31 interview with *News/North*, federal Status of Women Minister Maryam Monsef said the government takes this issue seriously.

"Our government will always stand up for a woman's right to choose and ensuring access to reproductive health services and options is a priority for us," she said. "This particular issue is one that we share jurisdiction with provinces and territories, and to the extent that the federal government has jurisdiction, we have worked to reduce the barriers in access that we are responsible for."

Health Canada is the lead on working with provinces and territories to improve access to the abortion pill for rural and remote women, and is actively reviewing access to ensure all Canadian women have equitable

reproductive health choices, said Monsef.

On July 18, Newfoundland and Labrador was added to the list of provinces and territories offering universal coverage of the abortion pill.

The cost of the series of pills is between \$300 and \$450, depending on the provider, making it cost-prohibitive for many women, states Action Canada for Sexual Health and Rights on its website.

Eight provinces have universal cost coverage programs that allow clients to access Mifegymiso for free by presenting a health card.

After New Brunswick instituted universal coverage, the number of surgical abortions fell and the number of terminated pregnancies rose, according to the New Brunswick Department of Health.

The NTHSSA is a separate entity from the GNWT Department of Health and Social Services.

Gaps in coverage prompted MLA Julie Green to pose questions to Health and Social Services Minister Glen Abernethy in the legislative assembly in February about when GNWT would extend Mifegymiso coverage to all women in the territory, and if the government would expand access to regional centres with doctors or midwives.



Avery Zingel/NNSL photo

**Nine women have been prescribed Mifegymiso, commonly known as the abortion pill, in the NWT since it became available last year.**

The department is reviewing coverage gaps for the pill to understand how to close the gaps, including considering supporting NOW in other regional centres of the NWT, said Abernethy during that exchange.

The abortion pill could bridge the rural-urban divide in abortion access, as more physicians incorporate medical abortion into their family practice, states the National

Abortion Federation on its website.

In November 2017, the federal government eased restrictions on prescribing Mifegymiso, extending the term limit for prescribing the pill to nine weeks of pregnancy from seven weeks, and loosening restrictions for prescribing practices, allowing pharmacists or a prescribing health professional to dispense the pills directly to patients.

# Longtime Inuvik councillor dismissed over unpaid fees

*Vince Sharpe thinks there is more to his dismissal than just fees*

by **Samantha McKay**  
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Vince Sharpe was dismissed from his role as an Inuvik town councillor in an in-camera session at the Aug. 8 town council meeting.

"They said it was because I owed \$700 to the town for more than three months," said Sharpe. "They did send me some letters, but I didn't open them, which is my bad. I forgot about them and the money wasn't paid. That's my fault. Before that happened, they could have given me the courtesy of a phone call, but that didn't happen."

According to the Local Authorities Elections Act, "a person is not eligible to be nominated or to stand as a candidate for mayor or councillor if he or she ... is personally indebted to the municipal corporation for a sum exceeding \$500 for more than 90 days."

Sharpe, who has been an on-and-off town councillor since 1978, said he was in a similar situation a few years ago. That time, he received a phone call from the town before the 90-day grace period was up and he immediately paid the money back, he said.

Sharpe said he has paid the \$700, which were dumping fees, since his dismissal.

He said he offered to pay his debts on the

spot during the in-camera session, but was denied.

Town of Inuvik Mayor Jim McDonald said Sharpe's dismissal was council following due process.

"As soon as it was more than 90 days ... it was automatic, it's not a council decision. It's just council following due process," said McDonald. "He felt he was treated unfairly because he wasn't informed, but he was invoiced and he had the statements, we followed that process."

McDonald said the dismissal was not connected to his relationship with Sharpe.

"It's nothing personal, certainly there aren't any grudges there," he said. "It's about accountability and council following due process."

Sharpe said he thinks the money owed is only part of the reason for his dismissal from his councillor position.

"They don't want any loose cannons on council that will tell the truth to the people," he said. "Two weeks ago at council, I was criticizing, on Facebook, the operation of the water treatment plant. I said, you know, we have a \$19 million plant – why do we have turbidity in our water? I got no answers to that."

On July 12, the Town of Inuvik issued a boil water advisory for the town due to high

turbidity levels in the water from the river. The advisory was lifted July 18.

Sharpe said he thinks the town should be more open and honest with the public about why there were high turbidity levels in the water.

"They didn't have a boil water advisory in Aklavik, but they had the same high water," said Sharpe. "We should be more open with what we're telling people and not just telling them that there was high turbidity at the plant. We should be telling people the truth about what happened."

He said he thinks the turbidity was caused by a human error because the plant has been short staffed.

"They made a mistake and should admit their mistake. You don't have to hide behind something else," said Sharpe.

McDonald said the boil water advisory was a result of high water levels in the river system, high turbidity levels in the river system and a problem with a polymer pump at the water treatment plant.

"The pump is used to take the solids out of

the water, which is the first step of the treatment process," he said.

"That failed, but they corrected it within the same day that the advisory was issued ... there was already turbidity in the water that had

gone through into the distribution system, which is why the advisory lasted for several days after that."

McDonald said the issue with the pump was not a human error.

"It was just a malfunction," said McDonald. "It's not a complex piece of equipment. It was just a pin that came out of the pump."

Despite being short staffed, McDonald said staff at the water treatment plant handled the problem well.

Sharpe said he plans to run for council again in the upcoming election and will continue to advocate for more openness and honesty between council and the community.

"There is an election coming up in two months' time and we can let the people decide if I should sit on council or not," said Sharpe.

"I was elected to do the best I can for our community and I always try to do that. I'm not going to accept this sitting down."



**Vince Sharpe**