

Oral Questions

[Translation]

HEALTH

USE OF HEROIN MEDICINALLY

Mr. Marcel Roy (Laval): Madam Speaker, my question is directed to the Hon. Minister for National Health and Welfare and concerns the controlled medical use of heroin as a pain killer, in order to relieve the pain of thousands of chronically ill patients, particularly in cancer cases, and I see that the former Chairman of the Committee of Health, Welfare and Social Affairs, the Hon. Member for Hull (Mr. Isabelle), seems to agree. When I was responsible for chairing the Committee on Health, Welfare and Social Affairs, I received many representations—

Madam Speaker: Order! These details are certainly most interesting, but they are not appropriate in a question.

Mr. Roy: Yes, Madam Speaker. I received representations and that is the purpose of my question for the Minister of National Health and Welfare. I would like to ask the Minister whether she intends to consider, within a reasonable length of time, the controlled medical use of heroin, and if so, what are the standards and the general criteria that exist now or would have to be established in order to approve the use of this drug in Canada in specific cases, as is recommended in thirty countries, including Great Britain.

Hon. Monique Bégin (Minister of National Health and Welfare): Madam Speaker, Canadian doctors have not had a long experience in the use of heroin as a pain killer. The approach I announced, and which I can confirm, consists in clinical trials, in palliative care units for terminal patients across the country, lasting between twelve and eighteen months and to be carried out according to the same scientific protocol which we are now drafting. I have also asked a committee of experts to prepare a monograph setting out the advantages and drawbacks of all painkillers, which will be printed for the benefit of physicians. As for use on a more general scale, I am not in a position to discuss this at the present time.

● (1440)

[English]

ROLE OF COMMITTEE

Hon. Walter Baker (Nepean-Carleton): Madam Speaker, I want to join with many Canadians in congratulating the Minister of National Health and Welfare for taking the initiatives she has with respect to this experiment.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Baker (Nepean-Carleton): If there is approval by the Chairman of the Committee on Health and Welfare I would join him in that approval. As a matter of fact I have a Private Members' Bill asking that that initiative be taken.

What was intended by the Minister of National Health and Welfare in her statement on this subject on May 16 when she

said, "Committee members are currently reviewing data on the various aspects of the issue and have invited all interested parties to submit briefs"? I presume that is to the Committee. Is it the intention of the Government thereafter to allow the standing Committee of this House to look at this situation from the point of view of the briefs that have been submitted and the reports that will have been made at that time so that the House, and this Committee in particular, can be used as a forum for many other Canadians such as medical practitioners and others who may not be parties but are interested?

Hon. Monique Bégin (Minister of National Health and Welfare): Madam Speaker, the Hon. Member can correct me if I am wrong, but I recall that he requested a similar reference to the standing Committee a long time ago. I must say that I did not consider it at this point and I think that the question has a definite very emotional dimension which will not help clarify the debate and we must all form a consensus on that.

If it is acceptable to everyone, I prefer to set up a committee of experts which will receive expert briefs on the various painkillers and find out what is known mainly to Canadians through the scientific literature of other countries on heroin, in order to prepare a monograph for practical use by physicians.

In other words, we took the pragmatic approach. For the time being I think that approach, complemented by the clinical trial results, will help all of us. At a later stage we may reconsider that suggestion which the Hon. Member just made.

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RAILWAYS

OFFERS TO BUY UNITED STATES RAILROADS

Mr. Les Benjamin (Regina West): Madam Speaker, my questions are directed to the Minister of Transport. The Department of Justice in the United States has recommended that the highest bid of \$120 million from Canadian Pacific to buy 770 miles of the Rock Island and Pacific Railway between Minneapolis and Kansas City be approved by the Interstate Commerce Commission.

As well, Canadian National is offering \$250 million to buy up 3,100 miles of the bankrupt Milwaukee Road railway lines in the United States.

Could the Minister explain to the House how CN and CP can afford the capital to buy up U.S. railways at a time when they say that grain producers and taxpayers should pay to fix up tracks in Canada because the railways here cannot afford to do it?

Hon. Jean-Luc Pepin (Minister of Transport): Madam Speaker, Canada is a neighbour of the United States and the United States is a neighbour of Canada.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!