As many of you are aware, major changes to the reimbursement of biologic agents via third-party payers have been occurring; many insurance companies providing group health plans are moving to a “prior authorization form” system, similar to the Exceptional Access Programs implemented by many provincial governments. To ensure that these changes are being implemented with evidence-based medicine and patient welfare in mind, an Ontario Rheumatology Association (ORA) committee was struck. Our committee has engaged in ongoing dialogue with three of the largest insurance companies, presenting them with the CRA guidelines for the treatment of rheumatoid arthritis (RA), as well as commenting on their proposed forms, to try and make their questions rational and appropriate. The insurance companies have, to variable degrees, accepted our comments: they have modified their forms and criteria to, we hope, minimize the difficulties that physicians and our patients will face nation-wide when all these changes take effect.

The realities of escalating expenditures and increased prescribing of biologic agents have made the third-party payers very aware of the use of these agents for the treatment of rheumatic disease. It may be of interest to know that one of the biologic agents that we use frequently is currently poised to become the world’s biggest-selling agent, with sales that will top more than $9 billion in 2012 and more than $10 billion in 2013. With further biologic agents in the pipeline, one can understand insurance companies’ desire to have more control over their use.

Despite our involvement, there will undoubtedly be changes in the prescription of biologic agents that will pose challenges for Canadian rheumatologists and their patients. The ORA plans to maintain an ongoing relationship with the third-party payers, and will strive to make the situation as transparent and open as possible as we move forward in this challenging time.

Jane Purvis, MD, FRCPC
President, Ontario Rheumatology Association
Rheumatologist, The Medical Centre
Peterborough, Ontario