

Quebec to consider covering cost of continuous diabetes monitoring

Health Minister Danielle McCann's press attaché said the government will study whether to defray the cost of the technology under medicare.

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Michaella Etienne's pre-school daughter Annie, in Côte-St-Luc on Friday November 16, 2018, has a rare form of diabetes that requires constant monitoring of her blood sugar, but the provincial government won't cover the round-the-clock surveillance under medicare because it costs more than \$5,000 a year. *DAVE SIDAWAY / MONTREAL GAZETTE*

Michaella Etienne's preschool daughter Annie loves to skate in her neighbourhood arena and play hide-and-seek with her older sisters.

But were it not for a thumb-sized device that Annie wears that monitors her blood sugar continuously, playtime might not even be possible.

That's because Annie has a form of Type 1 diabetes (<https://montrealgazette.com/news/local-news/adolescents-with-diabetes-need-better-help-transitioning-to-adult-care-muhc-study>) that doesn't show any symptoms if her blood sugars drop low or soar high.

That's a potentially serious problem. If Annie's diabetes were to become uncontrolled and her blood glucose levels plummet, she could be at risk of a seizure, lapsing into a coma — even death. Fortunately, the Côte-St-Luc girl can count on a relatively new technology, continuous glucose monitoring, that makes it possible to lead a normal life.

"This technology is saving her life on a daily and nightly basis, because we can't respond to her symptoms," Etienne explained. "If (most) children with Type 1 diabetes feel low, they start shaking or sweating, sometimes they feel thirst or hunger and other people in their entourage can respond to them. We can't do that with my daughter because we can't feel her lows."

The device is connected via Bluetooth to Etienne's smartphone and alerts her when her daughter's blood sugars are off. In a flash, she can give her daughter some insulin.

But that device, manufactured by Dexcom (<https://www.dexcom.com/en-CA>) in California, doesn't come cheap. The annual cost, including having to replace sensors every seven days, is more than \$5,000.

In the United Kingdom, the National Health Service funds the use of the equipment under specific circumstances. France, Germany, Sweden and Switzerland cover the cost under their national health-insurance plans. So do many private medical insurers in the United States.

But in Canada, no provincial health plan covers the device. In February, a provincial advisory panel in Ontario recommended the public funding of continuous glucose monitoring for Type 1 diabetics who are “symptom-unaware,” according to [Diabetes Canada](https://www.diabetes.ca/getmedia/255f8114-2c1e-4e93-9217-0a3a12844c54/CGM-Recommendation_042418.pdf.aspx)

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Etienne has the funds to cover the high cost, but she laments the reality that other Quebec families cannot afford the technology.

“Morally and ethically speaking, the government has to take action,” she said. “There should be no politics here, just a duty to take care of every citizen. Kids are our future, and the future is now.”

Alexandre Lahaie, press attaché to Health Minister Danielle McCann, told the Montreal Gazette on Thursday the government will study the issue. The Coalition Avenir Québec was elected to a majority government on Oct. 1.

“We are going to examine this question,” Lahaie said. “We’re just in the process of taking stock of all the different files. We’re not saying yes, we’re not saying no. We will inform ourselves on this question first and will take a decision eventually.”

Preetha Krishnamoorthy, an endocrinologist at the Montreal Children’s Hospital, treats many children, including Annie, who have benefited from continuous glucose monitoring.

“In children who have difficulty feeling whether their blood sugar levels are low or high, this can be really a wonderful technology for them,” Krishnamoorthy said. “It’s certainly something that can help in gaining control of their diabetes.”

“It is also fantastic for families to be able to know what the blood sugars are doing, so I definitely think it’s a very promising new technology, along with other new technologies (<https://montrealgazette.com/news/local-news/breakthrough-allows-type-i-diabetics-to-live-without-insulin-injections>) in the diabetes field.”

For now, Etienne and her daughters will continue to spread the gospel of diabetes awareness (<https://montrealgazette.com/news/local-news/diabetes-cancer-cases-to-soar-in-quebec-in-coming-decade-study>) and the benefits of the technology. On Friday, Annie’s older sister Raphaella spoke about diabetes, along with Krishnamoorthy, at Royal West Academy. Raphaella is also leading a charity project for her upcoming birthday, with the goal of donating finger puppets to the Children’s diabetic clinic.

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