

PHARMAC

Pharmaceutical Management Agency

Media release

PHARMAC funds new treatment for multiple sclerosis

A new treatment for multiple sclerosis will be funded from 1 December, Government drug-funder PHARMAC announced today.

Glatiramer (Copaxone) is a different type of drug to the two treatments already fully subsidised for multiple sclerosis patients. It has a different side-effect profile and may be better tolerated by some patients, says PHARMAC Chief Executive Wayne McNee.

Multiple sclerosis is a progressive condition that affects the central nervous system, and causes severe disability in some patients. There is no cure, however drugs such as glatiramer and beta interferon can help slow the progression of the disease.

PHARMAC has subsidised two types of beta interferon (Avonex and Betaferon) since 2000. Access to glatiramer will be under the same criteria as the beta interferons.

Wayne McNee says having glatiramer fully funded will provide a choice for patients and their clinicians.

“For some people the interferons can produce side effects that means they have to stop treatment,” Wayne McNee says. “Having an alternative product like glatiramer will mean that there is another funded treatment option for these patients.

“New patients starting treatment for multiple sclerosis will now also have a choice of three different drugs.”

Wayne McNee also announced that the access criteria for the multiple sclerosis drugs will change from 1 December. This will see people able to gain access to the subsidised medicines at an earlier stage of their illness.

Wayne McNee says the decision to amend the access criteria follows discussions with the Multiple Sclerosis Society and expert neurologists.

“We don’t expect to see an overall increase in patient numbers, however the advice we have had is that there may be long-term advantages for treating patients earlier,” he adds.

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