

Hepatitis B treatment to take forward step

Treatment of the potentially fatal liver disease hepatitis B is set to take a major forward step with an additional funded treatment available from 1 April 2009.

Government drug funder PHARMAC has agreed to widen access to pegylated interferon alpha, an antiviral treatment already funded for some forms of hepatitis C. The decision also sees access widened to include earlier treatment of two hepatitis C forms. The drug can be used on its own, or in combination with another drug, ribavirin.

Since the advent of immunisation, Hepatitis B has become less common internationally. In New Zealand there are about 300 new people who seek treatment each year, and it remains a cause for concern. Most people with hepatitis are never aware they have the virus, and do not exhibit symptoms.

PHARMAC's medical director Dr Peter Moodie says making pegylated interferon more widely available reflects current clinical treatment guidelines.

"Pegylated interferon has been shown to improve the cure rate for hepatitis B, so it is pleasing to make this decision," says Dr Moodie, adding PHARMAC expects about 35 patients per year to access treatment. "Our clinical advisory committee identified making pegylated interferon available for hepatitis B patients as a high priority."

"Pegylated interferon adds to the antiviral treatments already available for this liver disease, these include interferon, lamivudine and adefovir. So New Zealand patients will now also have this benefit fully funded."

There are six different forms of hepatitis C, known as genotypes. Pegylated interferon has been funded in New Zealand since 2004, and is currently available for genotypes 1, 4, 5 and 6 of hepatitis C. The access widening decision adds genotypes 2 and 3, without the need for the patient to have cirrhosis of the liver. PHARMAC expects an additional 40 patients to access this annually. Hepatitis B is a new funded indication.

Dr Moodie says PHARMAC is grateful for the contribution leading gastroenterologists have made to the decision in defining clear access criteria.

The access widening decision is made possible by an agreement with pharmaceutical company Roche, which involves sole supply of pegylated interferon until 2012.

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