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Media release

Greater access to life-extending lymphoma drug

Treatment for a form of cancer is about to take a forward step with the widening of funded access to the in-hospital drug rituximab (Mabthera).

From 1 July rituximab will be funded for the first-line treatment of patients with indolent, low-grade, non-Hodgkin's lymphoma (NHL).

Rituximab is already available in DHB hospitals to treat some other forms of lymphoma, however this decision to widen funded access will see about 200 more patients a year able to receive funded treatment.

PHARMAC's Medical Director Dr Peter Moodie describes the widening of access as a significant step for the treatment of lymphoma patients, in many cases extending their life expectancy.

Financially it is also significant, representing an additional spend by DHB hospitals of about \$12 million over five years.

"Our clinical committees, including the Cancer Treatments Subcommittee made up of cancer specialists and haematologists, were very keen on this decision being made," says Dr Peter Moodie.

"The evidence shows that rituximab, when used in combination with chemotherapy, has benefits for lymphoma patients and can be life-extending. Rituximab is an expensive drug, however the evidence from clinical trials combined with the commercial arrangement we have reached with the supplier meant that we considered this was a medicine that should be funded."

The funding decision, which will be paid from DHB hospital budgets, is in part made possible by the increased \$40 million earmarked for pharmaceuticals in the May Budget. The funding increase covers medicines used in the community and in hospitals, such as rituximab.

Lymphoma is a type of cancer affecting the immune system. NHL is a broad term encompassing some 20 different types of the disease, accounting for about 80% of all lymphomas. It is among the most commonly diagnosed forms of cancer in New Zealand.

Rituximab is a monoclonal antibody – a pharmaceutical 'smart bomb' that targets the CD20 molecule on the surface of cells in the lymph nodes, called lymphocytes. The

drug, an infusion that is delivered in hospitals, is already funded for patients with some aggressive lymphoma types and for patients with indolent, low grade NHL, where chemotherapy treatment has previously failed. Rituximab is given in combination with other chemotherapy treatment.

Lymphomas are increasing in incidence, partly because of improved detection and diagnosis, chemical and physical environmental exposures may also have a role in the increasing incidence. By 2012, lymphoma is projected to account for 5% of all cancers diagnosed in New Zealand.

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