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PHARMAC

Pharmaceutical Management Agency

Media release

Disabling cardiovascular disease gets funded treatments

People with a rare but disabling cardiovascular condition will have easier and more consistent access to three funded medicines following a decision by PHARMAC.

Pulmonary arterial hypertension (PAH) is a very serious and often fatal condition affecting the heart and lungs. It causes severe shortness of breath which makes even simple daily tasks difficult for people.

Some cases of PAH can be treated with medicines like calcium channel blockers. However, for more severe disease, doctors have had to apply to the PHARMAC-managed Exceptional Circumstances scheme. About 80 people are currently receiving funded treatment through this mechanism.

PHARMAC has now agreed to fully fund three treatments for the condition from 1 July 2009. These are sildenafil, bosentan and iloprost.

PHARMAC's medical director Dr Peter Moodie says bringing treatments for PAH within the Pharmaceutical Schedule will give more clarity to doctors over what is funded.

Access to the treatments will be determined by an independent expert panel of doctors who will review and advise clinicians, who make the applications. The panel is made up of clinicians with expertise in assessing and treating PAH.

"Listing these treatments on the Pharmaceutical Schedule will ensure national consistency and so avoid "post code prescribing," says Dr Moodie. "In doing so we expect people to access treatment more easily."

"These medicines can be effective in helping improve the quality of life for people with this very disabling condition. Indeed, in some cases it appears they can even reverse the effects of the disease. So this decision is good news for doctors and patients with PAH."

The treatments can be very expensive (over \$50,000 per patient per year), and can be used for conditions other than PAH, as is the case with sildenafil. Dr Moodie says the panel will ensure access is carefully targeted.

PHARMAC expects funding for the treatments to cost about \$17 million over the next five years.

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