

Media release

PHARMAC widens access to two cancer drugs

Cancer treatment has taken another step forward with PHARMAC recently approving wider funding for two cancer treatments.

The funding decisions are to widen access to

- rituximab (for chronic lymphocytic leukaemia), and
- to provide open access to docetaxel (used for many different cancers).

In the first decision, PHARMAC has widened funded access to rituximab for chronic lymphocytic leukaemia (CLL) patients who have not had rituximab before, either as a first line treatment or where their disease has relapsed following up to three prior lines of chemotherapy. This funding takes effect from 1 August 2011.

Rituximab, a cancer treatment delivered by infusion in hospital, is already funded for patients with lymphoma.

Leukaemia is a broad term for cancers of the white blood cells; chronic lymphocytic leukaemia is the most common form of leukaemia with around 2000 patients living with CLL in New Zealand at present.

PHARMAC's Medical Director Dr Peter Moodie describes the funding of rituximab as a significant advance for CLL patients.

"The evidence shows that rituximab, when used in combination with standard CLL chemotherapy, can significantly delay disease progression and in some cases it may even be life-extending."

In the second decision, PHARMAC has removed the funding restrictions on docetaxel so that is funded for the treatment of patients with any type of cancer. This decision took effect from 1 July 2011. Docetaxel, a cancer treatment delivered by infusion in hospital, was previously only funded for patients with certain types of cancer under Special Authority.

"The widening of access to docetaxel will see it used in a number of new cancer settings, most significant of which will be early breast cancer and advanced prostate cancer" says Dr Moodie.

Evidence shows that in breast cancer docetaxel has similar efficacy to another drug, paclitaxel, but it is easier to administer meaning that its funding will free up infusion service capacity in DHB hospitals so they can treat more cancer patients overall. In patients with advanced prostate cancer docetaxel is life extending compared with current treatment options.

Dr Moodie says 'Overall, these decisions increase the range of funded treatments available to cancer patients. We expect up to 600 cancer patients will benefit from these funding decisions each year. Financially, the decisions represents an additional spend to DHBs of about \$8 million over five years.'

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