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Media release

Cystic fibrosis treatment funded to save patients and money – PHARMAC

Funding azithromycin for cystic fibrosis is great news for patients and will save the health sector money, says Government drug-funder PHARMAC.

Azithromycin, an antibiotic currently funded to treat chlamydia, acts as an antimicrobial or anti-inflammatory agent with cystic fibrosis. It will be funded for cystic fibrosis from 1 July 2009.

People with cystic fibrosis generally require intensive treatment with antibiotics, nebulisers and daily physiotherapy because of ongoing lung infection and inflammation. There are currently over 400 children and adults with cystic fibrosis in New Zealand.

PHARMAC Medical Director Dr Peter Moodie says azithromycin treatment can reduce the number of hospital admissions and improve lung function in people with cystic fibrosis. Because of this PHARMAC expects the access widening to lead to overall cost savings through the reduction in hospitalisations patients will now require. PHARMAC estimates the savings to DHBs at \$1.6 million over five years.

PHARMAC expects about 190 patients will receive funded treatment each year.

“We are aware that it has taken longer to have this treatment funded than some groups wanted, however there were some significant issues raised that we needed to overcome,” says Dr Moodie. “Azithromycin is a very useful antibiotic to have available and its overuse could lead to an increase in resistance. We had to make sure that this very real concern was addressed in our decision and that it was well targeted.”

Dr Moodie says there is concern that providing open access to azithromycin as an antibiotic may lead to increased rates of bacterial resistance to this important drug. To prevent this becoming a problem, PHARMAC has decided against an open listing, preferring to target access to patients who meet defined clinical criteria.

Although a number of studies show that cystic fibrosis patients may benefit from treatment with azithromycin, the drug is not currently approved for this use by the medicines regulator, Medsafe. Despite this, doctors and cystic fibrosis support groups and patients have sought access to the drug.

Because it is still not approved by Medsafe for use in cystic fibrosis, parents or patients will have to give their informed consent to use the medicine ‘off-label’.

Dr Moodie says that PHARMAC will continue working to address the Medsafe registration issue, and will ask suppliers of azithromycin to apply to Medsafe to have the data sheet amended so that its use in cystic fibrosis is approved.

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