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Media release

New medicines, savings result from agreement

New funded treatments for HIV/AIDS and nausea, and a strengthened osteoporosis treatment have emerged from an agreement between PHARMAC and pharmaceutical company Merck Sharp & Dohme (MSD).

The agreement includes five medicines, including two that have not been funded previously. These are raltegravir (Isentress – a treatment for HIV/AIDS) and aprepitant (Emend – an anti-nausea treatment mainly used to counter the side-effects of chemotherapy). The other medicines in the agreement are:

- Alendronate (Fosamax and Fosamax Plus – used to treat osteoporosis)
- Levodopa with carbidopa (Sinemet and Sinemet CR – treatment for Parkinson's disease)
- Timolol maleate and dorzolamide with timolol maleate (Timoptol XE and Cosopt – used to treat glaucoma)

Funding and Procurement manager Steffan Crausaz says the agreement is a positive end to a process PHARMAC began with a legal challenge to a patent held by MSD. PHARMAC believed the patent, for alendronate, was invalid and filed papers in court to challenge it.

As a result of the agreement PHARMAC and MSD have discontinued their actions.

Steffan Crausaz says the new agreement includes multi-million dollar savings. The exact amount is confidential to PHARMAC and MSD.

Under the agreement, a new strength of Fosamax Plus will be funded (70 mg alendronate with 5600 iu cholecalciferol). The previous strength had half the level of cholecalciferol (vitamin D).

Alendronate is used by about 40,000 New Zealanders, mainly older women, as a treatment for the bone-thinning disease osteoporosis. The agreement will see the price of Fosamax and Fosamax Plus decrease in 2011, and again in 2014. The two products will continue to be funded until at least 2018.

Raltegravir (Isentress) is a new anti-retroviral treatment for HIV/AIDS. PHARMAC already funds a number of treatments for HIV/AIDS.

However, Steffan Crausaz says: "The HIV virus can develop resistance to treatments so additional treatments are considered useful by clinicians, particularly when the treatments are from a different therapeutic class to currently funded treatments."

Aprepitant (Emend), the anti-nausea treatment, will be subject to Special Authority criteria that will see it funded for patients undergoing highly emetogenic chemotherapy and/or anthracycline-based chemotherapy.

There are also price reductions for the Parkinson's disease treatments Sinemet and Sinemet CR and for one of the glaucoma treatments.

The agreement comes into effect from 1 October 2009.

ENDS

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