

New medicines ‘pay for themselves’ but too many Aussies denied access – new analysis

A major report into the enormous value that Australians receive from government subsidised medicines has highlighted the dire need to address spiralling rates of liver disease by adding breakthrough hepatitis C medicines to the PBS.

Hepatitis Australia today responded to research revealing that premature deaths in Australia from liver disease fell by a mere three per cent between 1998 and 2011, compared with a 42 per cent reduction in deaths from heart disease over the same period.

Hepatitis Australia CEO Helen Tyrrell said this discrepancy was directly attributable to a lack of investment in the prevention of liver disease, which is often caused by untreated viral hepatitis.

“Without access to effective treatment, more and more people with hepatitis will progress to serious liver disease. This is why the protracted negotiations to list new generation medicines to cure hepatitis C on the PBS must come to an immediate end,” Ms Tyrrell said.

“New hepatitis C therapies are the most significant medical innovation in a generation. These medicines have been ruled to be cost-effective and must be urgently added to the PBS to turn the tide on liver cancer, liver cirrhosis and liver failure,” she said.

Four new antiviral therapies that can cure more than 90 per cent of people with hepatitis C in just 12 weeks were recommended for PBS listing in March and July this year, but 230,500 Australians living with hepatitis C are still waiting on a government decision to subsidise the cost of these medicines.

Each month approximately 250 people with hepatitis C develop serious and potentially life-threatening liver disease. More than 700 Australians will lose their lives to hepatitis C-related disease this year, with experts predicting a 230 per cent increase in deaths by 2030.

The new research that is being presented today at the National Press Club by Professor Frank Lichtenberg from Columbia University Graduate School of Business shows new medicines effectively ‘pay for themselves’. His study found that medicines on the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme saved 140,000 years of life, as well as \$7 billion in savings to the Australian hospital system in 2011 alone.

Ms Tyrrell said that it was time to stop the narrow focus on the price-tag of medicines and recognise their immense value to the individual and health system. She noted that a liver transplant costs \$150,000 in the first year alone and that liver cancer treatment costs far outweigh the price of antiviral therapy to cure hepatitis C.

“The case for hepatitis C medicines has been made. We call on the Health Minister to ask her Department to fast-track the remaining price negotiations, to confirm funding and make an announcement this year for a PBS listing in early 2016,” Ms Tyrrell concluded.

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