

MEDIA RELEASE

BRAIN TUMOUR SUPPORT NZ

Hamilton, New Zealand

[Wednesday 13th September 2023, 9.00am NZST]

Access to brain cancer drug widened but newer treatment remains unfunded

Brain Tumour Support NZ welcomes the decision by Pharmac to widen access to the brain cancer drug temozolomide from 1st October 2023.

Currently, temozolomide is funded for people with newly diagnosed high-grade gliomas, including glioblastoma, the most aggressive primary brain tumour in adults. Pharmac has announced it will make the drug available to people with other types of gliomas, including low-grade gliomas, and people whose tumours recur or relapse.

“Temozolomide was first approved by Medsafe in 2005 and funded by Pharmac in early 2006, so it is not a new medicine and has been off-patent for a number of years already,” according to Chris Tse, chair of Brain Tumour Support NZ.

“The decision to widen access to temozolomide to people with any type of glioma, and those whose tumours relapse, is long overdue, however we will take any win in the brain cancer space, no matter how big or small,” Tse said.

Tse said the brain tumour community was still waiting for a newer drug, bevacizumab, to be funded for brain cancer patients whose tumours return.

“Bevacizumab was first approved to treat brain tumours by the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) in 2009 and is now funded in many countries around the world, including Australia,” Tse said.

The use of bevacizumab in brain cancer has been controversial, as clinical trials showed that while it delayed people’s tumours coming back, this did not translate to longer survival.

“Essentially, the patient feels well for longer, even if their overall life span remains the same, although some patients do gain a survival advantage also” said Tse.

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“Quality of life is important to our patients because when faced with a terminal illness they want to enjoy the time they have left as much as possible. Access to bevacizumab can be the difference between someone staying much of the time bedridden at home or being back at work, out and about exercising or enjoying time with friends and family,” Tse said.

Pharmac’s decision to widen access to temozolomide was precipitated by the news that another brain cancer drug, lomustine, is set to be withdrawn from the New Zealand market by the manufacturer, Bristol Myers Squibb. Pharmac announced today that they will be listing an alternative brand of lomustine from 1st July 2024.

While lomustine is not a new drug – it was first approved in 1976 – it remains an important part of the treatment landscape for brain tumours in New Zealand.

“The brain tumour community will be breathing a huge sigh of relief today on the news that Pharmac has secured an alternative supply of lomustine. One of Pharmac’s strengths is their expertise in global drug procurement and we are grateful that they have used this to secure supplies of this important medicine,” Tse said.

“However the fact that we are still relying on an old drug developed in the 1970’s speaks to the lack of new treatments for brain cancer. We desperately need better treatments, and these will only come through investment in brain cancer research, including clinical trials.”

Ends

ABOUT BRAIN TUMOURS

- Brain cancer is responsible for the most cancer deaths in children and young people under the age of 40.
- Brain cancer is the biggest cancer killer of children in New Zealand, being responsible for 42% of all childhood cancer deaths (almost double that of leukaemia)¹
- In 2020, 373 New Zealanders were diagnosed with primary brain cancer, representing 1.3% of all cancers diagnosed in New Zealand.

¹ National Child Cancer Network. 2022. Childhood Cancer Survival in Aotearoa, New Zealand 2010-2019

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- Around 290 New Zealanders die each year from brain cancer, making it the 10th most fatal cancer.
- Survival rates for brain cancer have not improved significantly in the last 30 years. The 5 year survival rate for glioblastoma, the most common form of brain cancer, is just 5%.
- Brain tumours can affect anyone, of any ethnicity, and at any age. The causes of most brain tumours are unknown which means there are no preventative measures and population screening is impractical.

ABOUT BRAIN TUMOUR SUPPORT NZ

Brain Tumour Support NZ is a registered charity formed in 2019 to provide much needed support, information and advocacy to brain tumour patients in New Zealand. Our Vision is that people affected by a brain tumour feel less afraid, less alone and more empowered.

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