

PRESS RELEASE - EMBARGOED until 3pm Friday 10th October 2014

PHARMAC's announcement a positive step forward for the MS Community

The Multiple Sclerosis Society of New Zealand (MSNZ) is delighted by PHARMAC's announcement today that it will fund two new treatments for Multiple Sclerosis.

After years of funding submissions, culminating in a campaign this year led by MSNZ, PHARMAC has approved funding for two new treatments and increased access to those currently funded for New Zealander's diagnosed with relapsing remitting forms of Multiple Sclerosis.

Biogen Idec's Natalizumab (trading as Tysabri) and Novartis' Fingolimod (Gilenya) will be funded from 1 November 2014. PHARMAC has also approved increased access to currently-funded treatments in today's announcement.

"This is a big step forward for people with Multiple Sclerosis in New Zealand," said MSNZ Vice President Neil Woodhams. "It means that many of those living with MS will no longer be subjected to a level of disability before their treatment is approved. This is momentous day for thousands of people living with a potentially manageable form of MS and their families. The majority of these people are young women, many of whom are mothers. Earlier access to treatments has shown to greatly reduce relapse rates and halt disease progression.

"New Zealanders have waited eight years longer than Australians to be able to access these treatments. If we can act quickly to support people with MS so that they can access the best first-line treatments then they can remain in the workplace, manage their own lives and care for their families. MSNZ's campaign is based on an issue of fairness and equality of access. Access to treatment wherever you are in New Zealand is a democratic right."

Strong concerns had been expressed to MSNZ that DHBs do not currently have the necessary access to resources to manage the changes these new treatments will bring about, says Woodhams. "Many of our DHBs are already understaffed. Canterbury DHB for example does not even have an in-hospital MS Nurse, despite having more than 400 people within its catchment area who are diagnosed with MS. "Nursing support is provided by our MS Society in the region, but this does come at a cost to the community and funding for these services is becoming increasingly hard to secure."

"We are glad to see that PHARMAC have heeded our concerns and has not ignored the importance of the current treatments remaining available for use, appreciating a person's individual clinical situation. This is particularly important for those out of the major cities where neurology services are limited. By also allowing general physicians to apply for MS treatments PHARMAC have taken a more person-centred approach making treatments more accessible and not restricted.

"It has been heart-breaking to hear repeated stories of people having to become disabled before they are approved for treatment. Thankfully we are now heading in a more positive direction."

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