
28 Aug - 1 Sept 2023

News

Oncologists face PBS drug dilemma 28.08.23 AM

Posted 28 August 2023 AM

Offering innovative but costly therapies is a major dilemma faced by Australian oncologists with a new survey finding they fear putting their patients under financial stress.

The survey, conducted by Servier Laboratories, aimed to unpack the barriers to cancer clinicians offering new therapies that are not available on the PBS to their patients.

While pharmaceutical companies often step in with a level of discount, known as co-pay programs, it still means considerable out of pocket costs for the patient. Only 10 per cent of the respondents said that they felt 'comfortable' raising the subject.

Private Cancer Physicians of Australia (PCPA) members, including radiologists, medical oncologists, and haematologist specialists were among respondents.

More than 70 per cent agreed or strongly agreed with the statement: 'If I think a patient is struggling financially, I don't raise the option of a co-pay program.'

All respondents said they felt a sense of responsibility for the financial impact of the co-payment program with 61 per cent stating they 'strongly agreed' with this view.

"As cancer specialists, we know empathy matters when treating the most vulnerable of patients but when it comes to offering our patients a very new, complex and expensive diagnostic technology or a new therapy, having that conversation can be challenging," PCPA President, Christopher Steer, said.

"This is particularly so, when the clinician is not convinced that treatment will work as hoped and they are concerned it will place the patient, and/or their family, under financial stress."

Nearly all respondents (95 per cent) said they would value access to independently produced support materials for them and their patients.

Tool kit in the works

The figures coincide with a roundtable being hosted by PCPA and their Education partner, Sandra Webb today (Monday) to co-design a tool kit to help overcome the challenges of offering these non-subsidised diagnostic technologies and therapies.

"Working in the industry is a great privilege for many reasons, not least knowing about the latest cancer therapies," Servier's Senior Medical Advisor for Oncology, Tim McNamara said.

"Few patients have this knowledge, however, and it's clear that there's a need to help doctors make patients aware of access options when PBS-subsidised treatments aren't appropriate or available."

PCPA's Strategic Alliance Partners - AstraZeneca, Gilead, Roche, Merck, MSD and Servier - will be in attendance along with the organisation's Advanced Trainees advisory board members.

"We need to ensure our members - and their Multi-Disciplinary (MDT) teams - are properly equipped with the right tools, clear cut independent information about what access programs and clinical trials are available to our patients, what are the out-of-pocket costs and then and we can work together to ensure our patients are triaged to the most relevant and effective resources for them," Steer said.

"Further, we need to ensure our members and others in the cancer care team understand and adopt the language and approach that works best and to not assume their patient can't afford a treatment without understanding their true situation beyond the confines of the waiting room.

"To this end, we are working with our Education Partners, ScienceToLife and our Strategic Alliance Partners and other key stakeholders including patient advocacy groups to develop a fit-for-purpose, up-to-date information portal.

"We all need to bring the best minds to the table to resolve this intractable problem of how to better support our patients, that we perceive will struggle to access those innovative treatments that may put them under financial duress.

"PCPA in collaboration with MOGA continues to work with all stakeholders including industry, consumer groups, government, the TGA and PBAC to improve access to medicines for all Australians with a diagnosis of cancer.

"This is a complex problem with a range of solutions. Appropriate communication between all parties, especially our patients is crucial to achieving the best care," Steer concluded.

Tiffany Walker

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