

ANONYMOUS



Department
of Health



Department
for Business
Innovation & Skills

From George Freeman MP
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Sir Keir Starmer QC MP
House of Commons
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15 OCT 2015

Dear Keir,

Thank you for your letter of 22 September to Jeremy Hunt on behalf of your constituent Mrs GRO-B of GRO-B London GRO-B about treatments for hepatitis C.

I was very sorry to read about Mrs GRO-B's ill health. Hepatitis C is a terrible disease and I appreciate her desire for access to the latest treatments. I was also very sorry to read that Mrs GRO-B was infected with the disease through NHS-supplied blood, and I am glad that she has received a payment from the Skipton Fund.

I am replying as the Minister for Life Sciences with responsibility for the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE).

NICE issued final guidance on sofosbuvir (Sovaldi) and simeprevir (Olysio) for treating chronic hepatitis C on 25 February, recommending these drugs for patients meeting specified clinical criteria. This is a significant decision that signals that the NHS is open to adopting innovative medicines that deliver substantial benefits to patients. This new class of drugs not only treats but can potentially cure patients of a terrible disease, delivering major health and economic benefits to patients and society.

NICE's positive guidance means that simeprevir was routinely available to eligible patients on the NHS within three months of the guidance being issued and, following NICE's decision to defer the statutory funding requirement for sofosbuvir, this drug became routinely available in line with NICE's recommendations from 31 July.

On 3 March, NICE published draft guidance for consultation on another new hepatitis C treatment, the interferon-free drug Harvoni. This draft guidance recommends Harvoni as a treatment option for some patients with chronic hepatitis C. Stakeholders have recently had the opportunity to comment on NICE's draft recommendation and NICE currently expects to issue final guidance later this year.

Genotype 1b - no treatment received till now.

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Once NICE publishes guidance, health professionals and the organisations that employ them are expected to take it fully into account when deciding what treatments to give people. However, NICE guidance does not replace the knowledge and skills of individual health professionals who treat patients. If a clinician feels that a certain treatment would be particularly beneficial to a patient, he or she can recommend it even if it has not been recommended by NICE, subject to the relevant commissioners agreeing to fund the treatment.

In these circumstances, it is for NHS commissioners to make funding decisions based on an assessment of the available evidence and on the basis of an individual patient's clinical circumstances. The NHS Constitution states that patients have the right to expect local decisions on the funding of drugs and treatments to be made rationally following a proper consideration of the evidence. If an NHS commissioner decides not to fund a drug, then it should explain that decision.

NHS commissioners are required to have in place clear and transparent arrangements for local decision-making on funding of treatments and for considering exceptional funding requests. These decisions are likely to span a complex range of conditions and treatments.

It is not clear from Mrs. **GRO-B**'s correspondence whether she has discussed with her clinician the possibility of submitting an individual funding request for a treatment and I would advise her to discuss these issues with them in order to decide on the right course of action. X?

More generally, I take the issue of ensuring rapid access to innovative therapies very seriously, which is why I launched the Accelerated Access Review (also known as the Innovative Medicines and Medical Technology Review) to make recommendations to Government on speeding up access for NHS patients to innovative and cost effective new medicines, diagnostics and medical technologies. The review is independently chaired by Sir Hugh Taylor, with Professor Sir John Bell heading its expert advisory group. It is expected to provide an interim report to Government shortly. More information can be found on the Government website at www.gov.uk by searching for 'accelerated access review'. ? X

I hope this reply is helpful.

Yours,

GRO-C

GEORGE FREEMAN