

MEDIA RELEASE

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ASBESTOS DISEASE SUFFERERS MISS OUT ON SUBSIDISED MEDICAL TREATMENT

CANCER drug Keytruda must be made available to sufferers of asbestos related cancer, mesothelioma, under the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme, according to the Asbestos Disease Support Society.

A failure to give mesothelioma sufferers access to this immunotherapy medicine risks creating two classes of patients, ADSS General Manager Trevor Torrens said.

Keytruda was originally listed in the PBS for people diagnosed with melanoma and has now just been made available for patients with advanced lung cancer, but mesothelioma patients have again missed out.

Oncologists are now prescribing Keytruda, an immunotherapy medicine that works with a patient's own immune system to recognise cancer cells and destroy them to mesothelioma sufferers but the cost can be more than \$6,000 for each treatment. If listed on the PBS, the cost could be as little as \$40 per script.

"Mesothelioma is a devastating disease caused by exposure to asbestos which is still impacting the community," Mr Torrens said.

"Keytruda is providing positive outcomes for many of our members who suffer from this disease, but at sometimes crippling cost.

"Unfortunately, mesothelioma seems to be one of the forgotten cancers. The Society is now calling on the federal government to show some compassion and subsidise Keytruda for sufferers of mesothelioma."

There are close to 700 new cases of mesothelioma diagnosed each year in Australia, with the peak still to be reached. People most likely to have been exposed to asbestos at work include, asbestos cement manufacturing workers, ladders and insulators, builders, plumbers and electricians, automotive industry workers, mechanics, transport workers and textile workers.

Phil Blair, ADSS Chair, said: “Just this year alone, more than 60 of our members have succumbed to an asbestos related disease, predominantly mesothelioma. All they did was turn up to work to earn a living or just went about their daily lives. It’s bad enough dealing with the devastating medical and emotional consequences of mesothelioma, but to also have to pay thousands of dollars for treatment is not fair.”

Mesothelioma is an incurable and extremely painful malignancy of the outer lining of the lung or the abdominal cavity that forms as a result of exposure and inhalation of asbestos fibres. Asbestos fibres are around 200 times thinner than a human hair, can be invisible and be inhaled easily. They can become trapped deep in the lungs and cause damage over a long time. Past exposure to asbestos is the only known cause of mesothelioma. It can take many years for mesothelioma to develop after a person is exposed to asbestos – the latency period, which is commonly 20 to 30 years after exposure.

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The Asbestos Disease Support Society is a registered charity and was established in 1992 to support sufferers of asbestos related disease, their families and caregivers and promotes awareness about the risks of exposure to asbestos.