Scotland’s approval of PrEP creates postcode lottery in UK, say campaigners

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Demand is mounting for UK-wide access to pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) to help prevent the transmission of HIV, after it was approved for use on the NHS in Scotland.

Campaigners welcomed the Scottish Medicines Consortium’s (SMC) decision to make Scotland the first part of the UK to approve emtricitabine/tenofovir disoproxil (Truvada) for use on a preventive basis by people without HIV.

PrEP has been shown to be 86% effective in preventing transmission if taken as prescribed and is currently available in Canada, France, Kenya, Norway, and the US. Preventing infection can save an estimated £360 000 (€422 000; $447 000) a patient, which is the lifetime cost of treating someone with HIV.

An estimated 1900 people in Scotland could benefit from taking Truvada. The SMC said that PrEP was one aspect of a wider HIV prevention strategy and that it should be used in combination with safe sex practices such as using condoms. Alan MacDonald, SMC chair, said that reducing the spread of HIV was “an ongoing priority for the Scottish government.”

NHS England lost a legal fight last year when the Court of Appeal rejected a claim that it was the responsibility of local authorities to fund the preventive treatment.1 In December 2016 NHS England announced that it would fund a three year trial of the drug in some 10 000 patients.2

There is concern, however, that no further details have been forthcoming. Robert McKay, national director for Terrence Higgins Trust Scotland, said, “We urgently need answers on when exactly the trial will begin and who will have access to it—and, ultimately, assurance that the NHS will retain responsibility for PrEP in England when the trial comes to an end.

“We must not let PrEP become a postcode lottery—it should be available to all those at risk, regardless of where they live.”

Elizabeth Carlin, president of the British Association for Sexual Health and HIV, said that PrEP has rightly been described as a “game changer” in preventing HIV transmission.

“It is cost effective for those at the highest risk and is one of the best evidence based tools for reducing onward HIV transmission,” she said. “As a next step we urge that treatment is made available to the people who need it as quickly as possible, both in Scotland and ultimately across the whole United Kingdom.”

NHS Wales is due to decide later this month whether to fund PrEP.

The SMC has also approved trastuzumab emtansine (Kadcyla) for use in the NHS in Scotland. Kadcyla is used in metastatic advanced HER2 positive breast cancer and was accepted after a discount deal with the manufacturer, Roche, although details have not been disclosed.

The full list price for trastuzumab is £90 000 a patient, which the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) considered too expensive for use in England and Wales in its draft guidance last December. The drug is currently funded through the Cancer Drugs Fund while NICE reviews responses to its guidance.


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