

WHAT IS THE NHS GOING TO DO ABOUT CANCER MEDICINES?

Michael Sobanja, non-executive director of the Care Oncology Clinic, considers some of the challenges inherent in treating cancer patients.



A cancer diagnosis can be devastating. In part, this reflects our inability to always deal effectively with the disease. Patients face a harrowing disease, harsh treatments, uncomfortable side effects and, all too often, premature death.

The pharmaceutical industry faces a difficult and diverse research challenge, while the NHS is asked to meet an unrealistically high bill for medicines, which do not have a 100% cure rate.

Politicians responded by creating the Cancer Drugs Fund to reimburse the cost of some prohibitively expensive new medicines, seriously undermining the role of NICE in making evidence-based assessments about which drugs to fund. Our political leaders have chosen to use taxpayers' money in this way to save themselves the embarrassment of headlines about drugs that are not available on the NHS, despite the fact that many of these drugs cost several tens of thousands of pounds and offer only limited extensions to life expectancy. This arrangement is neither equitable to cancer patients nor those with other life-threatening conditions.

There has to be a better way. One of these involves the use of existing medicines. For many years, studies have been published noting the benefit of combining conventional treatments with a range of existing, generic and inexpensive medicines that also show anti-cancer properties. However, these options are not widely used to treat cancer and are not available to cancer patients through the NHS. This is despite their availability, affordability and tolerability as well as the reduced toxicity that can be achieved by these combinations due to the lower number of cycles of conventional radiotherapy and chemotherapy that are required. Even when cancer patients have exhausted all conventional treatment options and cannot access any more of the new medicines, these generic options are not available – despite the wealth of published data supporting their efficacy.

With the guidance of leading oncologists, the Care Oncology Clinic was established to make these existing, affordable treatments available to patients at a low cost. Patients

can now benefit from conventional treatment combined with a drug regimen with well-known and tolerable side effects. In terms of efficacy, we hope to publish case reports within a year. We are seeing positive initial results, in line with existing data from studies exploring these generic therapies in combination with conventional approaches for the treatment of cancer.

Oncologist Professor Angus Dalglish believes this approach could greatly benefit patients: "Say we have a patient who is fit and healthy in many ways but is likely to be dead within months. If that patient asks me 'is there anything else I can do?' I will say yes, existing data suggest you could consider metformin, which appears to selectively reduce glucose uptake by tumour cells as opposed to normal cells. I suggest aspirin to tackle your inflammation and let's correct your vitamin D levels to boost your immune system. I call it creative compassion because it's not in the rule book and it's what I would want for myself if I were in the same position. I wouldn't want to just be told to go and seek palliative care."

Another leading oncologist, Professor Justin Stebbing, has also voiced his viewpoint: "As a profession we can be cruel to cancer patients, giving them treatments that are horribly toxic with minimal benefits. I find it very frustrating when my colleagues are dismissive of patients who want to try other things that are non-toxic and may extend their lives. We are now examining these medicines, to fully understand how to integrate them into patients' management in a way that is holistic and emphasises quality of life."

The Care Oncology Clinic's hope is for a future that sees the NHS reimbursing an effective, affordable and tolerable drug regimen, which provides real and significant benefits to cancer patients.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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