

Call for free cancer drugs for all

Patients in the private sector are denied access to free medicines from state "donation" programmes according to Campaigning for Cancer chairman and Werksmans lawyer Neil Kirby.



Neil Kirby wants cancer drugs to be donated to patients. Image: Werksmans

He was addressing the World Cancer Leaders Summit in Cape Town on Monday (18 November) where he called for a change in the law to allow patients with medical aids to apply for donated treatment while remaining with their own doctors in private practice.

The state's life-saving programmes rely on drugs donated by pharmaceutical companies. An example of such a programme is leukemia drug Glivec that has been given to selected government patients since 2002.

Glivec costs R1,000 a tablet and must be taken daily for months, which depletes some people's medical aids. Donations of the drug can only be made to state facilities because the law forbids pharmaceutical companies to donate medicine to the private sector or sell medicine to private companies at reduced prices.

Kirby suggested the National Health Act include a clause that allows or even encourages donation programmes. This would allow private and state patients to apply to get expensive drugs donated by drug companies.

But acting head of medical oncology at Charlotte Maxeke Hospital, Dr Georgia Demetriou, said although state patients could participate in expanded access drug programmes, private patients had access to many drugs that were not available to most state patients.

A report called the State of Oncology, written by leading oncologists and released at the cancer conference, showed that:

- The global cancer burden has doubled over the last 25 years;
- More people are living with cancer for longer worldwide so the cost of drugs is increasing;
- Over 50% of cancers occur in low- and middle-income countries and this will rise to more than 70% by 2020.

Source: The Times via I-Net Bridge

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