

Breakthrough melanoma drug approved

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Opdivo has been approved for use by the Government for the treatment of advanced melanoma and two types of lung cancer. Photo / iStock

A new breakthrough melanoma drug has been approved for use in New Zealand, but like its rival Keytruda it will be extremely expensive.

The makers of Opdivo (also called nivolumab) confirmed today that the immunotherapy medicine received Government approval yesterday for the treatment of advanced melanoma and two types of lung cancer.

Opdivo is the rival of Keytruda, the melanoma drug which some New Zealanders are paying tens of thousands of dollars to receive because state drug-funding agency Pharmac has decided that funding Keytruda is a low priority. Keytruda does not work in all patients, but some say it has saved their lives.

Both drugs take the same biological approach, which has been described as "taking the brakes off the immune system". They interfere with a tumour's ability to hide from the immune system, allowing the immune system to get on with its job of recognising and killing cancer cells.

The amount of Opdivo a patient needs is based on body weight. The cost to an 80kg patient will be more than \$7800 excluding GST a fortnight, plus distribution and dispensing costs.

Pharmac says it's seeking expert clinical advice on whether to fund a Opdivo.

The agency confirms the medicine's manufacturer, Bristol-Myers Squibb, has made an application for the medicine to be state-funded for advanced melanoma and advanced squamous and non-squamous non-small-cell lung cancers.

Keytruda and Opdivo both gained "breakthrough therapy" status from the United States Food and Drug Administration.

They are in the class called PD-1 inhibitors. They block the PD-1 receptor protein on certain immune system cells, which allows them to detect and destroy the cancer cells.

The registration of Opdivo in New Zealand opens the possibility of Pharmac trying to bargain prices down between Opdivo and Keytruda or negotiate discounts.

Opdivo is approved in New Zealand:

- as a stand-alone treatment to treat patients with advanced melanoma
- in combination with Yervoy (ipilimumab), another BMS drug, to treat patients with advanced melanoma
- to treat patients with advanced squamous non-small cell lung cancer (NSCLC) who have progressed on or following prior chemotherapy
- to treat patients with advanced non-squamous non-small cell lung cancer who have progressed on or following prior therapy.

- [NZ Herald](#)