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Arthritis Specialists applaud PBS listing for new drug

Arthritis specialists from the Australian Rheumatology Association (ARA) welcome the listing of a highly effective drug for the treatment of rheumatoid arthritis on the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme (PBS). *Enbrel* (etanercept) is prescribed for children and adults with severe forms of the debilitating disease that causes the destruction of joints.

Federal Health Minister Kay Patterson announced the PBS listing on 1 July. Patients, who meet strict eligibility criteria and respond to treatment, are now entitled to a subsidy for the costly drug, which has been available by private prescription for about eighteen months in Australia.

"*Etanercept* is the most significant advance in the treatment of rheumatoid arthritis and juvenile rheumatoid arthritis for the last ten years," said A/Prof Geoffrey McColl, Honorary Secretary of the ARA. Children and adults with severe disease, who fail to respond to other forms of treatment can receive twice weekly injections under strict PBS guidelines.

Eligibility criteria are necessary because *Etanercept* is an expensive medication costing \$25,000 per patient per year. Rheumatologists have to monitor the activity of the disease prior to commencing treatment and see specific improvements to continue prescribing it.

"The cost of *Etanercept* is high but the benefits are also high," said Dr James Bertouch, Chairman of the ARA Therapeutics Advisory Committee. "Arthritis specialists will fulfil all obligations in applying the PBS criteria for starting and stopping supply," he added.

Etanercept acts by blocking a protein that is important in causing inflammation and pain at the joint. It has been shown to decrease pain and improve the ability to perform daily activities.

As with any drug, there have been some side effects in some patients. But, on the whole, the treatment is considered safe," said A/Prof McColl.

Approximately 20,000 Australians have rheumatoid arthritis and it is estimated that 4,000 of them will be eligible for *etanercept* treatment in the first year.

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