



New drug gives hope to lymphoma sufferers

SYDNEY (AAP): Australians with a common form of non-Hodgkin's lymphoma will soon have access to a new drug which has just reported long-term survival rates of up to 91 per cent.

Results presented at an international cancer conference in the United States show improved survival and increased time in remission for low grade or indolent non-Hodgkin's lymphoma.

More than 3000 Australians are diagnosed each year with lymphoma, including 40 per cent with this type of the disease.

The indolent form is incurable and slow-growing, and has been fairly unresponsive to conventional cancer therapies like chemotherapy and radiation.

A French study presented at the American Society of Clinical Oncology (ASCO) annual meeting reported positive results for the drug MabThera when given in conjunction with chemotherapy.

The report, a final follow-up to a European trial completed in 2002, showed that more than three years on, 91 per cent of patients receiving the therapy were still alive. This compared with 84 per cent who had received the standard therapy.

And two out of three patients remained free of regrowth, compared with less than half in the group that had chemotherapy alone.

Lymphoma specialist Dr Paula Marlton, from Princess Alexandra Hospital in Brisbane, said the results for the drug had been astonishing.

"Trial after trial after trial all

show not just positive effects but astoundingly positive effects," Dr Marlton told AAP.

"Not just minimally better or a few weeks here and there, but survival advantages are really very positive."

The drug, which has been tested on Australians in previous trials, has been available on the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme (PBS) for limited sub-types of lymphoma, but not the indolent form.

But Dr Marlton said the Pharmaceutical Benefits Advisory Committee (PBAC) had recently approved this group's PBS reimbursement for the drug, generically called rituximab.

It was expected to be signed off by Federal Cabinet later this year but until then patients had to contend with a \$30,000 price tag for one course of MabThera.

"Obviously that puts the drug out of the reach of most people so the sooner that changes the better," she said.

Leukaemia Foundation general manager of research Dr Anna Williamson, said the trial results were extremely encouraging.

The survival rates for people with non-Hodgkins lymphoma were just over 50 per cent during the 1980s and 90s before development of the drug, Dr Williamson said.

"The effectiveness of the treatment has also significantly increased the length of time patients have without suffering from symptoms of their disease, which is very good news," she said.