



PRESS RELEASE

Tuesday 17 June 2014

Launch of new campaign calling for Equal Access to cancer drugs

Leading cancer charity Cancer Focus Northern Ireland is calling on the public to pledge their support for Equal Access to life-extending cancer drugs for patients in Northern Ireland in a new campaign.

Cancer Focus NI today launched the three month campaign in partnership with the Daily Mirror and with the support of 14 local charities. The campaign aims to secure 10,000 pledges of support via email, letters and postcards which will be delivered to Health Minister Edwin Poots at Stormont this autumn.

There are currently 38 cancer drugs available to patients in England that are not readily available to patients in Northern Ireland. Anyone who would like to pledge their support for equality of access for local patients should visit www.equalaccessni.org. The Daily Mirror is also delivering 70,000 petition postcards to readers across Northern Ireland.

Cancer Focus NI has been a driving force in the campaign to overhaul the current system to fund life-extending cancer medicines here.

Chief Executive, Roisin Foster, said: "Cancer Focus NI has been concerned for some time that local cancer patients are being denied access to life-extending drugs that are currently available in England and Scotland, and will soon be available in Wales.

"The purpose of this campaign is to ensure that the most effective drugs will be made available to local cancer patients in their time of need.

"The Health Minister has indicated that he will hold a review of the cancer drug approval process in Northern Ireland, which is a move in the right direction. However, patients do not want an open ended review - they want decisive action to improve access to drugs that could extend their lives, improve their quality of life and ease symptoms.

"There is much work to be done and politicians, patients groups, clinicians and drug companies will need to work together to get the best outcome for cancer patients. We hope a strong vote will persuade our politicians to act sooner rather than later."

Dr Richard Wilson is a Consultant Oncologist and Clinical Director of NI Ireland Cancer Trials Centre and Network, said: "Northern Ireland has contributed significantly to the field of cancer research, clinical trials and new treatments. In fact some of the medicines available on the Cancer Drug Fund list in England were developed and trialled in Northern Ireland, but are still not available to patients living here.

"Our cancer patients are, in some cases, unable to access treatments with proven clinical benefits available to others in England and now in Scotland. We're simply asking for the same rights of access for Northern Ireland cancer patients."

Professor Mark Lawler, from Queen's University Belfast, is a member of the Steering Committee European Cancer Concord (ECC). He said: "Article 2 of the European Cancer Patient's Bill of Rights, which we launched in the European Parliament in Strasbourg and which received cross-party support from our MEPs, calls for optimal and timely access to appropriate treatment and care for every patient in the EU.

"This includes rapid access to the latest innovations in diagnosis and treatment. Cancer patients in Northern Ireland are currently being denied potentially beneficial treatments available in other parts of the UK. We need to open this debate and investigate ways in which we can, in a cost effective manner, achieve the best outcomes for patients in Northern Ireland.

"Unless we act quickly, the success that we have achieved in the last 15 years in moving Northern Ireland from the bottom to the top of the UK in relation to increased survival for many cancers will have been wasted. We need to act now or else we will face significant problems in cancer outcomes that will impact heavily not only on our future health, but also on our economy and on society as a whole."

Allister Murphy (57) from Newtownabbey has advanced prostate cancer and has experienced first-hand the inequality of access to cancer drugs here.

"In 2008 when I was first diagnosed I was given two to three years to live. By taking part in two clinical trials I benefited from specialised cancer drugs, that otherwise would have been unavailable to me, and that have added years to my life. There are other men in Northern Ireland who are still denied access to these drugs. It is so unfair.

"I believe the lack of access to cancer drugs here is discriminatory. It wouldn't cost a lot of money to improve the system and would make such a massive difference to thousands of people's lives."

Roisin Foster reinforced: "Unfortunately there are very few people who have not been touched by cancer. The message is clear – we're calling for the public to back our Equal Access campaign. Visit www.equalaccessni.org and send a pledge of support to your local MLAs urging them to support Equal Access in Northern Ireland."

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For more information contact Louise Carey, Communications Manager at Cancer Focus NI, on 028 9068 0763 / 07884 362 749 or louisecarey@cancerfocusni.org

NOTES TO EDITORS

¹Correct at the time of print, National Cancer Drugs Fund List Ver 1.0 at 14 May 2014.

Local Northern Ireland charities supporting the online Equal Access campaign include:

Care for Cancer
Action Cancer
Cancer Connect
Cancer Choices
Angels of Hope
LILAC
Family Care in Cancer
Cancer Lifeline
Pretty 'n' Pink
NI Cancer Fund for Children
Friends of cancer centre
NI Hospice

Foyle Hospice
Southern Area Hospice