

Counting cost of £20m HIV drug

HERE'S a question for you: whom, do you suppose, is more deserving of our tax cash? Children suffering with cystic fibrosis struggling for breath, or gay men who fancy unprotected sex? It doesn't take too long to decide. Unless, that is, you happen to be someone likely to be detached from the real world, enjoying a life of wealth, privilege, gold-plated pension and private healthcare. Someone like a High Court judge, for instance.

Unbelievably, that was the decision one judge took last week. Every sane one of us accepts the NHS is not a bottomless pit of funding and that drug rationing is therefore necessary. That means tough decisions about just what and who can be treated, and what cannot, have to be taken.

However anyone involved in this decision has surely got a skewed sense of values.

The ruling was that NHS England should consider funding the HIV medicine pre-exposure prophylaxis (known as PrEP) which can cut the risk of infection from unprotected sex by as much as 90 per cent. The case was brought by the National Aids Trust, which obviously welcomed the baffling

decision. The NHS is due to appeal the ruling, with a final decision on the case expected next year.

PrEP is not a cheap drug. It costs about £5,000 a year and given the number of people who could qualify for it the cost to taxpayers is estimated at up to £20million per annum.

Following last week's ruling, a range of treatments were put on hold by the NHS due to new funding concerns. Victims of cystic fibrosis were not the only ones to lose out in favour of drugs to help mostly gay men enjoy a reckless lifestyle.

Extraordinarily, those who could have paid their taxes for four, five or six decades and are in danger of going blind due to cataracts will have the level of surgery available drastically reduced, in part to help fund the provision of PrEP.

Anyone suffering from a rare form of blood cancer and hoping for stem cell transplants, or amputees requiring a prosthetic knee, may be denied care.

How on earth can this possibly be justified? You don't choose to have blood cancer or cystic fibrosis but you do choose to have unprotected sex. How can it be deemed morally acceptable for the state to assist

those foolish enough to risk infection or their lives, while ignoring thousands of innocent victims of conditions they can't avoid?

It's important, of course, to remember you also don't choose to have HIV and in many instances the patient has been unfortunate in the manner in which they have contracted it.

However, did it not dawn on the judge involved in this case that his decision runs the very real risk of being seen as condoning irresponsibility?

The unforeseen consequences could so easily be that someone using this drug will feel they have, in essence, a "get out of jail free" card, in as much as they can afford to be less careful and therefore easily fall prey to other sexually transmitted diseases.

It's recommended that "at risk" people use PrEP every day but surely if you can remember to take a pill each day, it's not asking too much for you to use a condom on the occasions you have sex.

Unfortunately every pound spent on provision of this gay lifestyle drug is a pound not available for the babies, children and indeed all the others sick and in need of care.

Who can, in all honesty, support that?

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