

Wonder drug will prolong the lives of women with incurable cancer

Katie Gibbons

Hundreds of young women with incurable breast cancer will have their lives extended after health officials approved the first new drug targeting the disease in a decade.

The treatment is one of at least six breakthrough breast cancer drugs that have been sitting on the shelf for years amid NHS commissioning delays.

It will be particularly life-changing for young mothers, who will be granted extra time with their children, campaigners say. Each year 11,500 women die from incurable breast cancer; of these, about 400 are under 40. Experts called the guidance "momentous".

"Today's decision could be life-changing for many women," said Danni Manzi, head of policy and campaigns at the charity Breast Cancer Care. "Access to the life-extending drug eribulin will offer patients precious extra time to spend with their loved ones. For these patients, every day counts.

"We hope this will lay the foundation for improved access to treatments for women with this life-limiting disease. With so few treatment options available, it is momentous to bring another medicine to the table."

After rejecting it in 2012, the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (Nice) now recommends that eribulin should be made available across the NHS in England for the 1,182 women with locally advanced or metastatic breast cancer that has spread after two rounds of chemotherapy.

Further trials demonstrating the quality of life benefits of the treatment and an agreement that the £300 a-dose price will be lowered by the manufacturer were key to its approval.

Research shows that the drug, which is given as an injection once a week for two weeks, can extend life by up to three months. Trials have shown significant benefits for triple-negative breast cancer, a disease that is most common in women under 40 that until now there

has been no targeted treatment for.

Baroness Morgan of Drefelin, chief executive of Breast Cancer Now, said: "This is immensely positive news. Eribulin is the first breast cancer drug in a decade to be approved and this represents real progress for certain patients in England. It offers a crucial life-extending alternative for patients whose breast cancer has become resistant to other therapies."

However, many fear that inadequate commissioning systems mean this breakthrough could offer false hope to the 54,000 women diagnosed with breast cancer each year in Britain.

Lady Morgan added: "The real tests are still yet to come and we now await Nice's decision on the even more effective drugs being appraised. With the appraisal process that has rejected the previous ten breast cancer treatments seeing little meaningful reform, we unfortunately do not believe today's decision to be the beginning of a new trend."

Kadcyla is one of a handful of ad-

vanced breast cancer drugs awaiting Nice approval, despite a body of evidence showing it can extend life for 1 to six months. In some trials women lived for several years but it was rejected in December last year on cost grounds.

Carole Longson, director of the centre for health technology evaluation at Nice, said that the latest drug was approved as "a cost-effective use of NHS resources".

"We've been able to consider updated results from the trial used in the original guidance that show women taking eribulin lived on average almost three months longer compared with women taking other treatments," she said.

"We've also been able to take into account the results for health-related quality of life from another trial. This new evidence, together with the discount available through the patient access scheme, enabled the appraisal committee to conclude that eribulin represents good value for money."