

News

NHS to save £500m after victory over eye drug

Chris Smyth Health Editor

The NHS will be able to save hundreds of millions of pounds a year after a High Court judge dismissed an “absurd” challenge from pharmaceutical companies against use of a cheap drug.

The industry protested that the ruling allowing doctors to use a medicine unlicensed for eye disease undermined medicines regulation and put public health at risk. Doctors and NHS leaders praised a “victory for common sense over commercial interests”.

The row centres on Avastin, a cancer drug that is just as effective as two branded medicines, Lucentis and Ey-

lea, in treating wet age-related macular degeneration, which affects 600,000 people in Britain.

Avastin costs £28 per injection while the branded medicines that work in the same way cost 20 to 30 times more. The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (Nice) has judged it as safe and effective but Avastin has not been licensed as an eye treatment, making doctors reluctant to prescribe it.

Last year 12 local health groups in the northeast of England began offering it to patients, explaining that it would save the NHS money to spend on other care but prompting a legal challenge from Bayer and Novartis, which make

the more expensive medicines.

Mrs Justice Whipple dismissed their challenge yesterday, saying it was “perfectly clear” that Nice was competent to assess the drug. The companies’ arguments that the NHS could not consider Avastin unless its maker, Roche, applied for a licence as an eye treatment was “an absurd proposition. It would give unbounded power to the pharmaceutical companies to decide which medicines to make available for which purposes”. She added: “That would be seriously detrimental to the wider public interest in maintaining a cost-effective public health system.”

David Hambleton, chief officer for

South Tyneside clinical commissioning group, said that the 12 NHS groups were “absolutely delighted” by the ruling. “This is great news for patients with this condition and for the wider NHS. It’s a victory for common sense over commercial interests,” he added.

The Royal College of Ophthalmologists urged the rest of the NHS to adopt the policy to save £500 million a year. However, Sheuli Porkess, deputy chief scientific officer for the Association of the British Pharmaceutical Industry, said: “This extraordinary judgment potentially undermines the regulation of all medicines and by doing that, neither patients nor doctors have clari-

ty on what information to trust.”

Novartis is considering an appeal. Bayer said that the ruling prioritised cost over doctors’ clinical judgment and over the regulatory assessment of a medicine’s quality, efficacy and safety.

● An outbreak of an eye infection that can cause blindness is worsening among contact lens wearers in Britain, scientists say. Although acanthamoeba keratitis is rare, cases have tripled in the past decade. Contact lens users have been urged not to expose them to water to avoid further spread of the infection. Campaigners want health warnings issued with reusable lenses explaining how to avoid the condition.