

New cancer weapon to be fast-tracked into hospitals

Tom Whipple Science Editor

Patients in England could be among the first in the world to receive revolutionary cancer drugs after the NHS chief executive calls for the treatments to be fast-tracked into hospitals.

Simon Stevens believes the "tumour-agnostic" drugs offer "potentially huge" benefits to patients, by providing a new front through which doctors can attack cancers that have often been left behind by research.

The drugs target common mutations in tumours, meaning that rather than being designed for a specific type of cancer — such as breast or prostate — they attack a feature irrespective of location. Two drugs that do this, larotrectinib and entrectinib, are due to come onto the market within months. Both target a mutation found in some cancers that can inhibit growth. The mutation is occasionally found in common cancers, but is more prevalent in rarer ones, including salivary gland cancer and some paediatric sarcomas.

Initially about 850 patients a year in Britain are expected to benefit from the drugs if they are approved.

Mr Stevens will tell health leaders at the NHS Confederation conference in Manchester today that preparations are already underway to get these new treatments into use. "This exciting new breakthrough in cancer treatment is the latest example of how the NHS can lead the way in the new era of personalised cancer care," he will say.

New drugs are sometimes delayed because the NHS lacks the infrastructure to use them and the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (Nice), which is responsible for approving drugs, has less evidence by which to judge their efficacy. Mr Stevens's speech is an indication that he wants the Nice process to speed up and for hospitals to be ready with genetic testing needed to make the drugs work.

"The benefits for patients, in particular children, of being able to treat many different types of cancers with one drug is potentially huge, helping

them to lead longer, healthier lives," he is expected to say in his speech.

Mr Stevens will point to the success of Car-T immunotherapy, an expensive and complex treatment that harnesses the immune system's defences to attack tumours, and which was available on the NHS before many other health services. "NHS patients in England were at the forefront of the Car-T revolution and I want to make sure that they are also among the first in the world to benefit from these treatments," he is to say.

Ian Walker, Cancer Research UK's director of clinical research, welcomed the announcement. "These new cancer drugs absolutely represent the kind of exciting innovation the NHS should be looking to fast-track," he said. "The concept of focusing on specific mutations that drive a person's disease is a fascinating one. Whilst this approach may not work in all cases, where the weight of clinical evidence supports the approach this could open up opportunities for cancer treatment that we wouldn't have had 20 years ago."

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