

Skyrocketing cancer drug costs worry experts

Cancer drugs
CTV.ca News Staff

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New drugs are helping the fight against cancer, but their incredible costs have some wondering if they'll bankrupt both patients and the health system alike.

Eleanor Lowry is one person fighting cancer. It started in her liver and has now spread through her colon.

"I am 49 years old and still quite healthy and willing to take any kind of drug that will extend my life," she said.

One drug that might help is Cetuximab, also known as Erbitux.

It can slow the growth of colon cancer, according to studies. It is being used in the U.S. and will likely be approved in Canada in the coming months.

But cancer specialists worry about its price tag. Erbitux costs \$18,000 US per patient for two months of treatment.

"In the 1970s and 1980s we had one drug for the treatment of colon cancer. It might cost \$35 a month. But if I want to use the best treatment, we are talking several thousand of dollars a month," said Dr. Derek Jonker of the Ottawa Regional Cancer Centre.

Here are some other examples of the "sticker shock" inherent with modern cancer care drugs:

Retuximab: For non-Hodgkins lymphoma. About \$12,000 per patient

Herceptin: For breast cancer. About \$18,000 per patient

Even newer cancer care drugs in the development pipeline threaten to bankrupt the health care system, says one expert.

"In Ontario, we've projected that the total amount of money we'll have to spend on new IV cancer agents could double in the next two years, which is stunning," said Dr. Brent Zenke of Cancer Care Ontario.

CTV's Avis Favaro said while the new drugs bring improved survival to cancer patients, it's a survival that's often measured in months.

"Which brings government to an uncomfortable question: Can we afford all of these new anti-cancer agents?" she said.

"It's a question for society. How much is a human life worth? How many tens or hundreds of thousands of dollars is one year of human life worth?" Jonker asked.

"We have to find the funding somewhere to save our lives," Lowry said.

"It's a collision course between health care budgets and desperate patients. And there are no easy answers," Favaro said.

With a report from CTV's Avis Favaro