

# **WEST DUNBARTONSHIRE COUNCIL**

## **Report by the Director of Social Work Services**

**Council: 27 June 2007.**

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**Subject: Council support for Clydebank Asbestos Group campaign to continue prescribing Alimta**

### **1. Purpose**

- 1.1** To inform Council of a national campaign supported by Social Work Services in partnership with Clydebank Asbestos Group and other campaigners to ensure continuation of prescribing Alimta (a type of chemotherapy) for Mesothelioma patients in Scotland and to make Council aware of the main issues in this debate.

### **2. Background**

- 2.1** Clydebank Asbestos Group supported by Clydeside Action on Asbestos and Asbestos Action Tayside lodged PE 1006 before the Scottish Parliament Public Petitions Committee in October. It called on the Scottish Executive to ensure that the current prescribing arrangements for Mesothelioma sufferers, under which the drug Alimta is made available, are continued. In a few months, unless NHS Quality Improvement Scotland takes a contrary view, recommendations from the National Institute of Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE) will supersede existing advice from the Scottish Medicines Consortium (SMC) and new patients will not have access to Alimta.
- 2.2** Alimta is not a wonder drug. This treatment is not a cure and not every Mesothelioma sufferer would benefit from it. Clydebank Asbestos Group accepts that it is not appropriate to prescribe Alimta in all cases of Mesothelioma. However, Petition PE 1006 was submitted in the knowledge that access to this drug may be denied to many appropriate patients in the future on purely economic grounds.
- 2.3** The petition was prepared with assistance from Social Work Services and submitted on behalf of Clydebank Asbestos Group, West Dunbartonshire Council and the other campaigners. An officer from Social Work Services was required to present oral evidence to the Public Petitions Committee on Monday 30 October 2006 at a special meeting in All Saints Secondary School, Springburn, Glasgow. The meeting was convened in Glasgow as part of the Public Petitions Committee policy of making itself accessible to people in all parts of the country. The incidence of mesothelioma in Scotland ranges from 178

new diagnoses in 2000 rising to 200 in 2004. In the UK as a whole, approximately 1,800 new diagnoses are made each year and we expect the figures to peak sometime between the 2011 and 2015. Mesothelioma sufferers live throughout Scotland; however, more than half live in the West of Scotland - a toxic legacy of the shipbuilding industry on the Clyde. West Dunbartonshire has the highest incidence of mesothelioma in Scotland. It is six times the Scottish level which, in turn, is significantly higher than that for the UK.

### **3. Main issues**

- 3.1** Alimta is the only drug available to treat this asbestos-induced disease, a rare form of cancer which is also incurable. In some cases; Alimta can extend the life of a mesothelioma victim and ensure improved quality of life.
- 3.2** The treatment has been available in Scotland since July 2005, based on the advice of the Scottish Medicines Consortium (SMC). There is now a real concern among asbestos support groups in Scotland that sufferers will be denied the only treatment that is obtainable to them.
- 3.3** Alimta purchase costs to the NHS are less expensive than in other European nations. It is available to Mesothelioma patients in France, Germany, Spain, Belgium, the Netherlands, Switzerland and the United States. Other countries that make Alimta available to Mesothelioma patients are Poland, Greece, Bulgaria, Turkey, Hungary and Romania. These are countries, which have joined or are hoping to enter the European Union and aspire to the economic growth that we have in Scotland, yet their economies can provide this treatment.
- 3.4** Contextual differences were either present or absent when the initial decision to allow Alimta to be prescribed within the NHS in Scotland was made. Clydebank Asbestos Group regards this as a diversion from their focus which is the continued availability of this treatment for current and future Mesothelioma patients in Scotland.
- 3.5** Clydebank Asbestos Group supported by Social Work Services maintain that it would be an injustice if the supply of Alimta to Mesothelioma sufferers in Scotland were discontinued. In this they include the prescribing status of future patients. It is the opinion of the Management Committee that the withdrawal of Alimta would introduce a democratic deficit. Health is a devolved matter; any determination should be made in Scotland by members elected to the Scottish Parliament, or officers directed by them. They compel the Scottish Executive to reassure current and future Mesothelioma patients that the provision of Alimta will remain free and available in Scotland and that decisions taken elsewhere should have no impact on Scottish Mesothelioma patients within a devolved health service.

- 3.6** This campaign has the support of all parties in the Scottish Parliament. This was endorsed in a members' business debate on motion S3M-29, in the name of Des McNulty MSP, on Alimta for mesothelioma sufferers. The debate was concluded without any question being put. As well as this; the Leaders of all parties at Holyrood are fully committed to supporting the aims of Clydebank Asbestos Group, including Alex Salmond, First Minister.

Motion debated 7th June 2007

*“That the Parliament recognises that mesothelioma is a particularly aggressive cancer of the lungs, almost exclusively caused by exposure to asbestos; also recognises that West Dunbartonshire has the highest incidence of this work-related disease in Scotland and the second highest in the United Kingdom; further recognises that Alimta is the only drug licensed to treat mesothelioma, where it has been found to deliver significant improvements in the quality of life of sufferers, and considers that Scottish Executive ministers should ensure that Alimta continues to be made available to all existing and new mesothelioma sufferers who, in the professional opinion of consultant oncologists, would benefit from it.”*

- 3.7** Clydebank Asbestos Group's considered position is that National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE) should recommend that Alimta is made available on the National Health Service to every Mesothelioma patient in the United Kingdom who would benefit from it. However, if it does not, it will fall to NHS Quality Improvement Scotland (QIS) and ultimately the Scottish Executive to decide what happens as far as Scottish patients are concerned. The drugs approval process in Scotland is set up so that it recognises differences between the two sides of the border, and the distinctiveness of Scotland provides evidence and justification for taking a different stance on Alimta, should that prove necessary.

**4. Personnel Issues**

- 4.1** There are no personnel issues.

**5. Financial Implications**

- 5.1** There are no financial implications.

**6. Risk Analysis**

- 6.1** It is not necessary to carry out a risk assessment for this report.

## **7. Recommendations**

- 7.1** Members are invited to endorse the aims and activities of this campaign and support the continued involvement of council officers.

William W. Clark,  
Director of Social Work Services  
18 June 2007

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**Person to Contact:** William W. Clark, Director of Social Work Services,  
Tel: 01389 737599

**Appendix:** None

**Background Papers:** None

**Wards Affected:** All